

DANCE WITH THE DRAGON DUKE

S. L. PRATER



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For women who fight hard to support other women.

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Trigger Warning

The characters in this story explore grief and loss in a way that may be triggering for some readers. Please take care of yourself.

This kissing book is full of delightful debauchery. It was written for an adult audience. Please be advised that it contains some foul language, sex work, mild fantasy violence, and numerous open door sexual scenes between consenting partners including tail play. Romance is the plot in this cozy, steamy escape book. There are no battles or dragons to slay here.

Chapter 1



Tomorrow

Tomorrow contemplated her path to revenge. She perched at the bar in the parlor of the finest brothel in River Row, numbly clutching a glass of ale between her fingers. A loose wave of short, ashen hair slipped over her face. She blew the wispy strands off her brow, then shoved them behind the tall point of her ear, digging deep to find her courage.

Turning on her stool, Tomorrow situated herself so she could better spy on her target, the next step in her plan: Darko Yaga, the dragon Duke of Mount Rasika. He rented the room down the hall from hers. There was only one reason someone might choose to stay at that particular house of ill repute if it wasn't the company of a courtesan they sought.

Only the desperate in need of safety kept rooms long-term at the Gilded Boot. The establishment was under the diligent protection of the Bloody Queen of Night herself. Assassins and scoundrels did their murdering and robbing elsewhere, or—so it was said—the legendary queen came for them.

"He's not as scary as he looks," Susan, the madam of the brothel, assured her.

After Susan had brought her the drink, Tomorrow had forgotten she was there, lingering near her shoulder. The madam seemed to have taken a liking to her since she'd arrived three weeks ago. Tomorrow appreciated her and her business partner's kindness. She felt safe in their house in a way she hadn't in a long while.

Susan nudged her arm encouragingly. She wore her honey-colored hair in a braided knot, showing off her slender neck. Her pale throat sported a colorful love-bite. "Just go and talk to him."

Desperate for a kind ear, Tomorrow had shared her plight in detail with the madam, a woman accustomed to keeping secrets. Susan had recommended she approach the duke. The mortal madam seemed wise beyond her years, and she clearly had great business acumen. She was probably right about the man, but . . . gods, just glancing at him made Tomorrow's hands clammy.

The Unseelie lord shrank the furniture around him. He sat at a corner table, nursing an ale, and his boulder-like fist made the glass look like he'd stolen it from a child. As tall as he was, she wondered how he fit through most doorways. Scaled black horns curled from the crown of his head. Bulky muscles filled out his evening jacket.

Tomorrow scratched at the top of her own horn-less head. Nothing about her person inspired fear or respect. She played pretend at nobility in a borrowed blouse. Layered skirts hung off her slight hips. The petticoats hadn't been tailored to fit, and they were too long for her Seelie frame. The hem dragged on the ground when she walked.

In contrast, the word "intimidating" fell short as a description for the duke. He had all the markings of the Unseelie—immortals from the southern provinces, descendants of dragons and trickster fae. A powerful tail draped down the side of his chair to the floor, curling around his feet. Like a serpent, it was scaled in leathery black plates. If she examined his sculpted attributes individually—the square jaw, the rugged features, the thick bronze hair—she'd call him handsome, but all of that together made him too frightening.

Striking was a more accurate word.

Susan nudged her. "I promise he won't bite."

Tomorrow swallowed, thinking of the extra sharp teeth around his incisors. She'd spotted them the few times she'd been spying while he took a meal.

She didn't need any help being overwhelmed around the gentry. As the illegitimate daughter of a recently deceased duke, she'd grown accustomed to feeling like she didn't add up in their presence. Darko looked like he could crush her bones into pudding between two of his brawny fingers. The combination was enough to make Tomorrow's lungs hitch. Her next breath escaped as a wheeze.

"A few days ago," Susan said soothingly, "one of my workers found herself in a spot of trouble. A regular of hers was trying to overstay his welcome, you see.

I've got people for just that, but we didn't have to call them. Darko overheard the patron fussing in the hall and hauled him off, easy as can be. The duke claimed he did it to stop all the noise, but I think he can't stand leaving anyone in distress. And that's exactly the sort of person I'd want to partner with if I had a plot to carry out and needed protecting."

Tomorrow blew out a breath. "All right. If you say he's the best person for my scheme, I'll go and talk to him."

"I say he's your best bet." Susan's blue eyes sparkled in the gaslights, as did the diamonds dangling from her rounded ears. "He's who I'd ask, at any rate. Considering what you have in mind, it's a nice bonus that he's handsome, eh?"

Tomorrow sighed. She'd have preferred him to be less attractive, in fact. The cramp building in her stomach might have loosened then.

But what was the worst that could happen? He could say no. She'd have no one else. Her cousins—the Freest family—would try to kill her again.

She'd die.

Tomorrow shivered despite the growing heat in the parlor from the steady stream of patrons and the blazing fire in the hearth. She couldn't wait around for her cousins to kill her. Time was not a luxury she had a lot of, and she was done with being a coward. She took one last swallow of ale, let the alcohol warm her bones, then rose from her stool.

"Attagirl," Susan said encouragingly.

Tomorrow ambled across the room, pumping a confidence into her strides that she didn't feel in her heart. The parlor would soon be stuffed to the brim with regulars, making a conversation nearly impossible. It was now or never.

She halted beside the duke. He was even bigger up close. Her feet shuffled beneath her. Averting her eyes, she peered at the tops of her boots peeking out from the hem of her oversized skirts.

"Your Grace?" Her voice broke as she said it, and her cheeks burned.

"Shove off," the duke huffed.

And shove off she did, like a scared mouse racing back into its hole.

* * *

The next night, Tomorrow was at it again. A coward she may have been, but she was not yet ready to abandon her plan. She took her dinner in the parlor and watched as the duke ate his meal—an Unseelie beet stew—at the corner table he favored.

She cracked her knuckles and pumped her arms, trying to fuel her courage.

“Ready for round two?” Susan teased, setting Tomorrow’s dinner plate in front of her: pickled herring on thick Lunar bread. “Look there.” The madam pointed at the duke’s table.

Margot, Susan’s business partner, sat across from him. The voluptuous, dark-haired courtesan seemed slight beside the duke.

“What’s Margot doing?” Tomorrow asked.

“When we need a break from entertaining the guests, we sit with Darko,” Susan explained. “He chases off the customers and doesn’t ask for anything in return. Hasn’t made a single demand of us since he got here three months ago.”

“He has protective instincts,” Tomorrow said thoughtfully. Dragons were notorious for being as defensive and possessive as they were protective. She could use several doses of each. “I think I can do this . . .”

Worried she’d lose her nerve if she didn’t act quickly, she slipped from her stool. Her boots connected with the hardwood floors and her ankle rolled. Stumbling forward, she righted herself.

She was not off to an excellent start.

“Don’t stop now,” Susan said gently. “Go on, then. I’ll keep an eye on your dinner.”

Tomorrow wished the madam would accompany her instead. She nearly told her so, but Susan was pulled into a flirtatious conversation with a patron. Trying to squeeze between customers, Tomorrow bumped into tables and side-stepped guests. As Seelie-small as she was, she was easy to miss, even easier to knock aside by accident.

Finally, she made it across the room to the duke, feeling a bit like she’d traversed a treacherous battlefield. At the table, Margot smiled welcomingly. Tomorrow did her best to return the gesture and grimaced.

“Find somewhere else to be,” the duke grumped at her in the hard guttural accent of the people from the mountains.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Tomorrow stammered, dropping clumsily into the chair opposite him. She missed part of the seat and had to adjust. “Ahem, I’m not here to harass Margot. I stopped by to harass you, actually—er, not harass. I don’t mean to bother anyone.”

The duke glowered at her with eyes as dark and glossy as volcanic glass.

Meekly, she cleared her throat. “I, um . . . Maybe I should start over?”

Margot slid a comforting arm around her shoulders, ending her rambling tirade. “Quit your scowling, Dark,” she said affectionately. “You’re making my friend nervous. This is Tomorrow. She’s sweet, and she just needs a quick word with you. You can go back to glaring at your drink as soon as she’s spoken her piece.”

“I can’t promise it’ll be quick,” Tomorrow confessed with a breathy laugh, wringing her hands in her lap. “When I’m anxious, I tend to go on and on and on, and you’re, well, you’re quite befuddling and—” She swallowed her next thought, deciding it wouldn’t be polite to say aloud the adjectives that came next, which was remarkable for her. She usually struggled to keep her words inside her mouth when she felt on the spot. Talking to the gentry made the condition worse.

He lifted one black brow at her. “Befuddling?” Something in his expression softened, though there was absolutely nothing about him that should have been characterized as soft.

Tomorrow gestured broadly at the whole of him, from the curve of his scaled horns to the bulky proportions tightening his blue-trimmed jacket. “Well, you’re quite intimidating. Surely you’ve noticed.”

A patron stopped at the table in an attempt to get Margot’s attention. Dark sent him off with a dismissive flick of his wrist, like he was shooing away bees. The customer scampered away, his bushy fae tail between his legs.

“The duke is as striking as he is terrifying,” Tomorrow confessed to herself. The words needed a safe place to get out now that she was seeing him up close again, but the chatter in the parlor quieted just then and her thoughts carried further than she wanted them to. Heads swiveled in her direction, including the duke’s. Her face flushed. “Beg your pardon. That bit wasn’t for your ears.”

Margot cackled. “Don’t fret,” she said between bouts of mirth. “He *knows* he’s beautiful. It’s completely unfair when they already know it. What’s a girl to do in

the presence of so much befuddlery, eh?”

Tomorrow grinned at her, and the nervous sensation tightening her chest eased somewhat.

“What the girl should do,” Darko said with a voice like a grumpy grizzly bear, “is tell me exactly what it is she wants as concisely as possible before I give up on the lot of you and take to my room early.”

“That— I can try that.” Tomorrow licked her dry lips. She wanted his respect almost as much as she wanted his help and worried both were slipping away from her fast. “Obviously, I come in a much smaller, less refined package than you, but I want you to know I’m an immortal too. I’ve been alive for three whole centuries. I’m not some fragile green fledgling.”

“I can see what you are,” he said dismissively.

She took a moment to organize her thoughts before pressing on. It helped when she studied the backs of her hands, which were covered in freckles, instead of the chiseled lines of his statuesque face. “I’ve recently come into an inheritance, a generous one that I need, but it’s kept in trust by a diligent executor.”

Margot squeezed her shoulder encouragingly. “She’s a duchess, Dark, and she needs your help.”

“A bastard duchess,” Tomorrow added, glancing at his evening jacket of seasons past. The silvery blue trim was fading. “Before I can collect, I need a partner—someone with a title of his own who could really use the coin—because there are stipulations.” She scratched at her forehead, coming to the complicated bit that made her face heat further. Hoping to cool herself, she tugged on the collar of her blouse.

It didn’t help.

“You’re the daughter of the Duke of Easton,” Dark guessed. Whatever he said next, the words were swallowed up by the crowd pressing in around them.

A blonde doxy climbed onto the bar and started to dance, flipping up her skirts for tips. The crowd responded with loud whoops. Margot jumped to her feet and added to the noise, cheering on her employee. An impromptu bawdy song stole over the parlor, something about a buxom barmaid in search of a ribbon.

Tomorrow scooted in closer, trying to hear Darko better. One of his big hands locked around her elbow.

“Gods above and below,” she gasped. Clearly, he was done talking. An image of her being tossed across the room like some discarded rag doll immediately came to mind.

To her great surprise, his touch was gentle as he pulled her to her feet. Instead of throwing her, he tucked her against his solid side, guiding her away from the crowd. His long, powerful tail stretched out before him, pushing away abandoned chairs, scooting tables across the hardwood. He used his spare arm—the one that wasn’t around her back making her sweat lead bullets—to move eager patrons of varying states of drunkenness out of her path.

She made it across the parlor and into the entryway without coming into contact with another person, a feat she’d never managed before on her own. If he were auditioning for the role of protector, he’d have won it just then. Unfortunately for Tomorrow, there was absolutely no one for him to compete with.

“That was impressive,” she told him in the hall. Her mouth tugged up at the corners.

Darko ignored her to speak gruffly with the footmen manning the entrance. A heavy fur-lined frock coat was brought to him. Without a word, he dropped it over her shoulders.

“Oof.” The weight of it surprised her, but it was soft and thick and very warm. It smelled of fresh wool with hints of wood smoke and musky cologne. She fingered the image of a gilded blue trident stitched into the cuffs. “What’s this symbol mean?”

“It means,” he growled, “that you talk too much about things that have nothing to do with why you came over to bother me in the first place.”

“Ah,” Tomorrow said. He had a point there, and she scratched at her cheek uncertainly.

The doors were pulled apart for them. Winter’s chill whipped inside to stir her hair, but she barely felt the bite of it through the mountain wool. “Don’t you need your coat? I have one in my room.”

“I’m a dragon,” he rumbled at her. Returning his hand to her elbow, he guided her through the doors. In the cold, his horns and tail steamed.

As they crossed the threshold, Tomorrow spotted an old wooden nail centered in the front-right door. Susan had told her that the Queen of Night had hammered the stump of a thief's hand there to deter repeat offenders. Now only the nail remained. Tomorrow was safe behind the protection of that tack. Beyond it, she felt like a lamb lost in the woods, surrounded by hungry wolves. Instinctively, she moved closer to the duke. His dragon heat warmed her.

After a few paces, he halted them under a gas lamp that glowed brightly, illuminating Main Street. The sound of the brothel's playful debauchery was a dull roar at their backs.

Tomorrow's nerves sharpened. A light snow began to fall. The street was quiet, but pedestrians crowded the sidewalks. The theatre across the way must have just finished a performance.

Could another assassin be lurking amongst them? It had been weeks since she'd spotted some unsavory type tailing her home from the market, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

"Talk," Darko commanded, ripping her from her thoughts. The steam rolling off his horns gave him an appearance of being boiled. It added profoundly to his ability to make her feel befuddled.

"Right, right." Tomorrow shuffled her feet. The snow picked up just enough to begin collecting on the ground. "I know we've only just met, and I realize this isn't the most romantic of places," she added, spotting a puddle not far from their feet that could have been vomit or possibly piss.

"I've been in worse," he said, folding muscled arms over his chest.

Swallowing hard, she met his eyes. "Your Grace, will you please marry me?"

Chapter 2



Dark

Dark stared at the small woman before him, as dumbfounded as she'd seemed earlier in the parlor. What was the word she'd used? Befuddled.

That was him now. A befuddled dragon.

"Hm," he grunted at her, momentarily unable to put syllables together to form sensible words. His gaze dragged down her body, and it didn't take long to inspect the whole of her. She was a dainty thing. The top of her head barely reached his breastbone. Dark knew better than to underestimate the Seelie because of their slight frames. In the great war all those centuries ago, they'd won for a reason.

The Seelie were ferocity in tiny packaging, but Dark struggled to describe this woman that way. Tomorrow, was it? An unusual name. Margot had called her sweet, and he sensed that was apt. She radiated softness, not fierceness. He could nearly taste syrup in the air around her. Sweet as Rasika berry pie, this one was.

And hurting.

She wasn't fully fae. Her freckles—a mortal trait—gave her away. The woman had thousands of them. They clustered in thick sun-bronzed constellations across her pale cheeks and up-turned nose. She had a boyish figure, and she'd chopped her wavy hair short—an uncommon choice in the Faelands, which made him curious. It fell to her chin, framing a narrow face.

"My mother was my father's mistress," she said in the lilting accent of the Seelie from the north—immortal descendants of elves and fae. "She died in childbirth. The Duke of Easton never did a thing for me growing up. I hardly

knew the man, but then he went and shocked us all. Though he barely acknowledged me in life, he claimed me in death. He named me his heir.”

“But there are stipulations.” His breath misted in the cold he barely felt against his thick skin. He was accustomed to a father who always added stipulations.

Tomorrow nodded. She hugged herself in his coat as fat snowflakes broke apart in her white hair, dampening it. “I suppose he wanted to make sure I was proper—proper by mortal standards. He was only a little bit fae himself. He lived a long while, but he wasn’t immortal, and time caught up to him. Now my inheritance remains in trust. The lands, the houses, the wealth—I can’t touch any of it unless I marry a man of title.”

“And you think I’m the right one for the job?” He repressed the urge to scoff. She was hurting, and he didn’t intend to disparage her.

Tomorrow stared down at the toes of her boots, which peeked out from her gray skirts. The hem soaked itself in the gathering snow. “If it helps, I’m quite sure we won’t actually have to go through with a ceremony. The last time I spoke to the executor, he was content with a written engagement agreement signed by a magistrate, but he won’t be easily fooled. He’s the noble sort, and he intends to honor my father’s wishes. We would need to make a few appearances out in society so that our whirlwind romance appeared convincing.”

“I don’t know how good I’d be at playing a pretend betrothed.”

“We could figure that out together.” Under the gas lamp, her copper eyes burned red. The color reminded him of sunrises on a stormy day, dark clouds set aflame. “I need someone like you. Someone big and befuddling. Someone who will make my enemies think twice before coming for me again.”

“Enemies?” Sweet little women who radiated syrupy goodness shouldn’t have enemies. He had enemies. Heaps of them. He’d left them all behind when he abandoned the Unseelie provinces in search of amity in River Row.

He deserved to have enemies.

Her cheeks colored, and he couldn’t be sure if it was from shame or from the cold. “I hesitate to speak an ill word against my father’s family, but . . .”

Family was sacred to the Seelie, Dark recalled.

“You’re in danger,” he guessed. It made sense. It explained why she kept a room at the Gilded Boot but never participated in the revelry.

Her next breath escaped in a whoosh. She nodded. "The day my father's will was read turned out to be the worst of my life. I've been living in fear ever since, dodging the next in line. If you'll help me, I'll give you half. Half of everything that's coming to me."

He should send her away, Dark thought. He should put her back inside, turn her down right now before she got her hopes up. Couldn't she sense that he was trouble? He attracted it. Danger clung to him, stalked him like a starved predator, and it was always the people around him, the ones who were most vulnerable, who ended up eaten alive. Never him.

"Go back inside," he said curtly, and her shoulders noticeably drooped. "I'm not saying I won't help you," he added because the look on her face made his heart squeeze painfully. She had a soul-shattering frown. "But I need to think on it a while."

Tomorrow's chin trembled, and if he thought his chest had hurt before, it took another pounding then.

"I can understand that," she whispered, "but you need to know I can't give you much time to ruminate." She swiped at her cheek, vanishing the tear that had leaked from the corner of one expressive eye. "I don't know how much time I've got before they win and steal my inheritance, but it can't be long now. They won't just give up, and I'm out of hiding places."

Dark didn't know what to say to that. It bothered him, watching others hurt, especially if there was something he could do about it, but what if his attempts to do something in this case only brought on more trouble? What if the danger that shadowed him got her instead?

It wouldn't be the first time.

She turned to leave, then her boots caught on the walkway like she'd had a change of heart. "I wasn't going to burden you with all the melodrama that is my life right now, but I think I'm finally too desperate to cling to any shred of dignity I might have left."

Dark's brow furrowed.

"They poisoned me," she said, the words husky leaving her lips. She reached up and tugged on a lock of her hair. "I used to have a braid so long I could sit on it, but then I was named as heir to the Easton duchy and my cousin, Glen Freest, *poisoned* me. I lost most of my hair. Nearly lost my life too, but my grandmother

sold her orchards to buy expensive tonics and spells from the fairies to help put me on my feet again. And that was just the first time.”

Heat speared his chest, and his hands flexed at his sides. “They poisoned you twice?”

She shook her head. “No, I mean, it was only the first attempt on my life. I had to leave the Seelie Provinces after the third. I was making my grandmother unsafe. Now I need to collect what’s coming to me so I can reclaim what belongs to her and stop those greedy sons of bitches from taking more of what they don’t even need.”

“It’s my understanding that the laws of the Lunar Court are fairer than they are in the mountains where I’m from,” Dark noted. The Unseelie favored conquest over succession. If someone bested a lord in battle, then they’d shown themselves as more fitting. It was often how titles were passed on if the heir wasn’t as strong, but that wasn’t the way here.

“Oh, we tried the law,” she said sourly. “As soon as I came to, I shouted about who’d poisoned me. We talked to every constable who’d listen.”

“I take it they didn’t see things your way?”

“They did at first.” She kicked the heels of her boots together, knocking the building snow off them. “Then some chap who looked a little like my cousin showed up out of nowhere and confessed to injecting me with this horrid concoction. The stranger was thrown in prison, and suddenly the man’s family had enough money to move out of Dimmet Street, but I can’t get the constables to see the payoff for what it was. Glen has everyone believing that I was mistaken about him. That I was delirious from being ill so long. It doesn’t help that I’m not from this province originally and Glen is. Now the Freest family hires out for their evil, and I’ve had no peace ever since.” Her jaw clenched, and she shivered in the cold wind that had stirred up around them.

Peace. The word scratched at Dark more deeply than anything else she’d shared. He knew that desire. He longed for rest himself. Longed for a time when he didn’t have to watch his back or sleep with one eye open. But the riches she offered him weren’t the answer to that. In his experience, title and wealth tended to bring about more of the same. It wasn’t her promise of half her inheritance that made him interested.

It was her.

When he reflected on his long life full of war and turmoil, he saw face after face, lost soul after lost soul, all the people he hadn't been able to save. He'd been responsible for many. He'd been their leader. Their commander. Their duke.

He was the Duke of the Dead now. Mount Rasika had been razed. It was nothing but a tomb, just mud and rocks and salted earth.

But could this little woman be his redemption, his one chance at getting right what he'd always gotten so wrong? If he saved her, could he finally earn his peace? Perhaps then the turmoil that clung to him would release him at last.

"I'm different since they made me sick," she pressed on, another tear sliding down her cheek and dripping off her chin. Dark's heart fell with it. "The poison made my feet heavy, like my bones are full of cement. I'm clumsy and tired all the time. I used to love to dance, but I can hardly walk in a straight line now. They took it all from me—my hair, my grace, my peace, my strength. But I'm done with being taken from." Her throat bobbed, and her jaw set. A bit of the Seelie fierceness he'd come to admire lit her copper eyes. "They won't get one more thing that's mine. The constables look at me like I'm too sickly and weak to be worthy of their belief. All I get is their pity, but damn it all, I deserve help when I ask for it!"

Unable to stand it, he trapped her next tear with his thumb, wiping the cold drop away. "Give me the night to think it over," he said, anger clotting his voice. He knew the sort that took from the vulnerable. They were just like his father had been—brutes and tyrants that needed to be put down. They couldn't be reasoned with, couldn't be cured. Unredeemable. "I don't like to make hasty decisions, and I won't dishonor you now by agreeing out of blind sympathy. I'll have your answer first thing in the morning."

Her smile was sad. "I can't really argue with that. Wish I could, though." Briskly, she pointed to the brothel's side entrance down the shadowed alleyway, and she hugged herself for warmth. "I'm not a dragon, so I better get inside before I freeze to the pavers. I'll see you in the morning."

A drunk and his friend stumbled out of the brothel's front entrance, and Tomorrow paused. Dark kept a sharp eye on the pair as they lumbered down the walkway and disappeared around the corner. Shuffling in closer to him, Tomorrow waited at his side until they were gone.

"Almost forgot your coat." She started to shoulder out of it.

Dark stopped her, laying a hand on her arm. She was bone thin under the heavy wool. Tomorrow hid well the frailness of her prolonged illness. He wouldn't know the history of her body's struggle at just a glance, but now that he was looking for the signs, they were there, and they were stark.

Thinking again of tyrants and bullies, a muscle in his jaw jumped. "I'll collect the coat from you when we talk in the morning."

"If you insist." She slid her arms back inside the long sleeves and parted from him, dwarfed by the massive garment. Her skirts dusted the ground. Her feet left dainty prints in the snow. The combination was so pitiful he could hardly stand it.

Fury on her behalf raised his body temperature. Thicker clouds of steam billowed from his tail and horns. He held his tongue as she navigated the alleyway, getting swallowed up by the night. The duke watched over her until he heard the door open and shut and he was satisfied she'd made it safely inside.

As he leaned his weight against the nearby lamppost, the metal groaned in protest. The last of the crowd filtered out of the theatre across the street, and a carriage pulled by four lean Lunar horses rumbled by. A constable walked his beat, eyeing the dragon duke with interest before turning down the next street.

Dark was about to go inside, but instinct kept him in place. His keen ears picked up the sound of nearing footsteps. Four men appeared from around the same corner the stumbling pair had disappeared behind moments ago. The first he recognized immediately as the drunk from before, except he wasn't acting intoxicated any longer and he'd pulled the hood of his cloak up to shade parts of his face. The duke lowered his eyes and reached into his jacket lapel, acting as though he were searching for his tobacco and rolling papers, concealing his interest in the new group.

Two of the men were immortal: one horned Lunar fae with blue skin, the other with a ruddy tail like a fox. The remaining two, including the faux drunk, appeared to be human. They slowed as they came closer to the duke and his lamppost. He pretended not to notice them, and they did the same. Instead of making for the brothel entrance, they headed down the shadowed alley.

No, you fucking don't.

Dark trailed the scoundrels at a distance. A trickster with the ability to magically change his shape, the duke's finger morphed into the sharpened claw

of his dragon form. He scratched open his forearm, accessing his magic. Bright black blood met winter's chill and steamed. The smell of brimstone rent the air.

He covered himself in a glamour, making his broad body unnoticeable, sacrificing his life force for magic. Blood that seeped from the cut evaporated, feeding the spell.

The fae with a fox tail checked over his shoulder. He looked straight through Dark, then motioned his friends toward the side entrance. "This is where she usually comes and goes," he told his companions.

"We should slip in now and grab the Seelie bitch, quick like," the horned one said. "They's busy as bees in there. Nobody'd notice a thing."

"Not rutting likely." The hooded human scoffed. "Someone might well notice, and I'm not getting paid enough to bring the blimming Bloody Queen of Night down on me. I vote we wait here in shifts till she steps out again. Then we stick her, dump her in a bin, and get our coin."

Dark saw red. It seethed through him, hot as molten lava from the Hell Mountains. Fueled by it, his tail elongated. In one powerful swipe, he hit the faux drunk, knocking him to the ground. The mortal went limp against the stones and didn't get back up again. With another whip of heavy scales, Dark pinned the ruffian with a fox tail to the brick side of the brothel.

The horned fae cried out before lunging at the duke. Dark blocked the blow, catching his fist against his forearm. He grappled with the blue-skinned fae, shoving his bulk against the wiry frame of his attacker.

Dark caught the gleam of metal in his peripheral as the fourth scoundrel pulled a blade from his cloak and stabbed at him. The duke attempted a block, shoving the blade down. The attacker drove the dagger into Dark's thigh, cutting through wool and thick flesh. Searing pain radiated from the wound. The duke howled at the sky.

The Lunar fae wrapped his hands around Dark's throat and squeezed. The duke brought his weight down against the bend of the attacker's arms and broke the hold. He head-butted the scoundrel, the curve of his horns connecting with the attacker's nose, and the Lunar fae stumbled back.

But Dark's reprieve was short-lived. The human had another weapon at the ready. The duke smelled salt and iron, and his lungs hitched.

Iron was poisonous to immortals. He winced, ready for a burn like hellfire to consume him. The human brandished the blade, crouching into a fighter's stance.

The window above Dark's head flew open. Shrieking like a battle-hungry banshee, Tomorrow launched herself from the sill, bringing down the bladed attacker under her weight. Knocked loose, the dagger clattered against the pavers. Susan and Margot poured out the side entrance. The madam swung a fire-poker threateningly, while Margot waved a mop like it was a broadsword.

Together the women screamed like murderous harpies. Tomorrow swung her fists wildly, battering the human beneath her into the stone alleyway. Dark knew by the madness of her strikes that she hadn't been in any fights before. But what she lacked in form, she made up for in enthusiasm.

Dark's thigh oozed black blood around the blade. He limped forward and caught the horned fae by the throat, pinning him to the wall beside his co-conspirator.

"You all right, Dark?" Margot asked, eyeing the dagger jutting from his leg.

"I'm all right," he said through gritted teeth.

A sharp screech sounded in the distance, a patrolman's whistle.

Susan lowered the fire poker. "Constable's coming, Darko. These fools are Lunar. You're not. If you kill a local, they'll throw you in their iron prison while they sort it out. You too, Tomorrow. Ease off him now. He ain't worth it."

Dark grumbled at her, annoyed that she was right.

Tomorrow climbed slowly to her feet, chest heaving, eyes burning with that legendary Seelie fierceness. The human attacker shielded his face and cowered from her. It amused him, watching one of the brutes who had discussed so cavalierly stabbing her, now cowering from the tiny woman.

"Teach them a lesson," Susan suggested, "but don't murder them right here at our place of business, please. The constabulary could shut us down for weeks."

Margot rested the broom handle on her shoulder. "Let me get a good look at this lot," she said, squinting at the faces of the scoundrels. "I'm going to give the Bloody Queen of Night a detailed description of each of you ratbags. Every line, mole, and pimple. If you know what's good for you, you'll leave the province before the queen gets her hands on you, rips you apart, and nails bits of you to our front door."

The human beneath Tomorrow scrambled to his feet and ran. The fae with a fox tail tried to make a break for it, but Dark tightened his hold, the heavy plated scales of his tail pressing the man against the wall so hard he groaned. The horned one showed his teeth defiantly.

Margot poked the unconscious mortal in the cheek with the end of her broom handle. He didn't move.

"I could eat that one," the duke said, the words rumbling from deep in his throat. "I could devour him whole while his friends here watched. That'd teach them all a lesson, and then there'd be nothing left for the constable to find."

The horned fae whimpered, and Dark felt him swallow under his palm.

Susan shrugged her shoulders. "Works for me. Come on, Margot. We'd better slow down the constable. He'll be here soon. Eat fast, Darko."

The two of them sauntered down the alleyway, hoisting their skirts above their ankles to keep their hems from dirtying.

Dark leaned on his good leg. His injured thigh screamed at him. "If I ever see you again," he told his captives, pain coloring his words with menace, "I'll burn you both into smoldering piles of ash."

With a sacrifice of the blood oozing from his leg, he allowed smoke and sparks to blow from his mouth. His next breath covered them in smog, singeing their clothing. Brimstone stung his nostrils.

When Dark released them, they bolted from the alleyway, slipping and sliding in the gathering snow.

"What about that one?" Tomorrow asked, jutting her chin at the unconscious human on the ground. She favored her fists, clutching them to her chest like they hurt. "Are—are you really going to eat him?"

"No," he scoffed. "Certainly not in this form. Susan and Margot can handle one mortal. They'll probably offer him to the constable as the reason for the commotion."

"I suppose that's wise."

Their eyes met, hers a whirlwind of worry and fear. A tangled mess of white hair curtained her pale face.

"You saved me from an iron blade," he said.

"And I regret it," she said playfully. Sucking in a breath, she showed him her knuckles. They were bright red and trembling. "Helping you really hurt. I don't

think I'll try it again."

A grunt of laughter slipped out of Dark. "You swung at him with your thumbs tucked into your fists. You'll break your hands that way."

"Gods above and below!" Tomorrow's eyes widened on the knife sticking out of his thigh, seeing it for the first time. "They stabbed you! And you're standing there lecturing me about my fighting form?"

"I'm all right." It wasn't pleasant, but he'd certainly suffered worse. It wasn't even bleeding much with the blade still in place. Taking it out was the tricky part.

"Divines' sakes. No, you aren't!" She rushed to his side, tucking herself under his arm. "Let me help you."

Dark rested a fraction of his weight against her. Tomorrow sunk under his bulk.

"Oh, holy hell. You're heavy as a horse," she said, gritting her teeth and glancing down at the black blood oozing from the tear in his leg. She gagged.

"I'm not offended that you think I'm too heavy to lift," he told her, "but I will be offended if you vomit on my wound."

Tomorrow covered her mouth and looked away, struggling to heft him forward. "I'm not going to vomit on it." Words muffled by her fingers, her face drained further of color. Even her freckles blanched.

"Good." He hobbled another step closer to the side entrance.

"Ack. Why's it black?" she squeaked.

"Dragon blood comes in a variety of colors," he said with a shrug.

"Doesn't it hurt?" She ripped open the door and ushered him through it. He was so broad the maneuver was an awkward one, cramming them together, but they managed.

"The pain is terrible," he said flatly.

She peered again at the handle jutting out of his thigh and choked.

"Stop looking at it," he suggested.

"Ugh, I'm going to have to give you more than half of my duchy now. You've already gotten stabbed because of me." The threshold opened into a servant's hall. A narrow set of stairs led down to the rooms for long-term guests and some live-in staff. Another wider set headed upstairs to the second floor where most patrons were entertained.

“Perhaps I got stabbed because of me,” he offered. He’d started the fight, after all. She was frowning again, but he hoped his suggestion would make her stop.

“No,” she sighed, lips turned down. “I recognized the rogue with the fox tail. He’s followed me before. The Freest family hired him. I’m sure of it, damn them.”

Slowly they lumbered together to the duke’s bedroom. Dark fished a brass key out of his pocket and gave it to Tomorrow to unlock for him. Leaning forward placed too much pressure on his injury. After a moment of fiddling, the lock turned, and the door rattled open.

Dark maneuvered inside and planted himself on the end of a large four-poster with velvet curtains, stretching his damaged leg out in front of him.

She closed the door and stood facing it, her head down.

“Tomorrow?”

At her name, her chin lifted, but she didn’t respond.

“I’m going to help you,” he said, suddenly missing her tendency to ramble on. He preferred that to this sad silence. “If that’s what you’re worried about, don’t. I’ll be your pretend lover. I owe your cousin a dagger in his leg now. You might as well get your inheritance while I’m at it.”

Tomorrow let out a sigh, but she still wasn’t looking at him. “That’s a relief. Thank you, but . . .”

His thigh burned sharply. He didn’t look forward to moving again. “But what?” he demanded, giving in to the distraction she offered.

“Never mind or I’ll just start rambling. I’ve done enough of that tonight, and, ugh, your leg looks terrible!”

Chapter 3



Tomorrow

“G ods above,” Tomorrow groaned. “I’m the worst! Look what I did to you.” She glanced once more at the protruding handle and the oozing black blood, and she covered her mouth with her hand to conceal how it made her heave.

“You weren’t the one who shoved the blade in,” Darko said, square jaw set.

A gust of air blew out of the nearby closet and Tomorrow jumped. The wood around the frame groaned.

Her hand went to her heart. “What the blazes was that?”

Darko’s brow shimmered with sweat. Bronze hair had come free from behind his ears to cling damply to his face. “That’s just my hoard settling in.”

“Your . . . you mean, like, your treasure place?” She blinked at him. Didn’t dragons keep their hoards in treacherous mountain caves? Not in closets. And why did his sound like it was breathing?

“It goes where I go, moving between doorways.” He motioned her closer. “Come. I’ve had a rest; now I need to stand up again. Help me inside my hoard so I can heal, and I’ll let you ramble at me for as long as you like.”

“Oh dear.” After a moment’s hesitation, she hurried over to him. Leaning down, she helped him slide one of his massive arms across her shoulders. As he rose, she strained to brace him, cursing colorfully.

She didn’t look at the dagger handle, holding him as best she could around his waist, taking pressure off his injured limb. Tomorrow knew better now than to glance down, but as he shifted his weight, she heard the wound squelch, and her stomach turned.

"I'm being rudely squeamish," she said, her voice pitching higher with every word. "I know I am, but you'll just have to forgive me. You have a *thing* sticking out of your leg, and stuff that should remain inside your body keeps trying to seep out of it."

Darko chuckled.

The sound caught her completely off-guard. How could he laugh? He was mad. That was the only explanation. Mad enough to take her up on her offer and pretend to be her lover, though, so she shouldn't complain.

One lumbering step at a time, they made it over to the closet. She opened it for him, hurling the door wide. It clattered against the wall.

"This is your hoard?" She frowned at the empty closet. The most impressive thing about it was the intricate cobweb woven in the corner by a fuzzy brown spider. Below it there was nothing but dusty shelves and a few spare bed linens. But what did she know about such things? Not wanting to offend him, she added quickly, "I mean, it's a lovely hoard, of course. A hoard I'm sure any dragon would be proud of."

He snorted at her. "Shut the closet. It only works when I do it."

Tomorrow grabbed the knob and pulled it closed. As he reached for the door, more of his weight pressed against her. Her knees shook, battling to remain steady. A blast of hot air blew out through the crevice at the bottom of the frame. It warmed the toes of her boots and smelled like ash.

Darko twisted the knob until it clicked like the workings of a clock, twice, then thrice. He shoved it open, and there was a whole new world on the other side.

"Divine Day's blazing beard!" Tomorrow's jaw went slack. There was a paradise in his closet. Bright green pastures rolled before her, filled with colorful flowers as tall as she was. A waterfall roared in the distance. Sparkling blue waters jetted from mossy rocks under a purple sky, like it couldn't decide if it was night or day inside—outside?

"Almost there," he panted.

As they entered—or exited?—Tomorrow felt the air change around her. It was thick with magic. Darko closed the door behind them. Instead of the entrance to a closet, a lonely astronomy tower made of sandstone loomed behind them.

With a whoosh of breath, he turned on his bad leg and wriggled the knob again. It clicked three times. When he opened it, the bedroom was gone, revealing the inside of the tower. She helped him limp over the threshold.

Tomorrow was stunned silent, an unusual state for her. Stone steps curled up the wall to a landing out of sight. She shuffled Darko into the nearest chair, a luxurious piece made of thick maroon velvet next to a small, rounded window that showcased the waterfall outside. The walls were decorated with star charts and drake art, urns and linen hangings made to look like dragon scales in various shades of green and blue. The trident emblem was emblazoned on an ornate rug beneath their feet.

"The bureau over there . . . Fetch me the vial from the drawer," Darko said, indicating the opposite wall with a weak wave of his hand. Color was high in his cheeks, and his next inhale was sharp.

The bureau sat under a star chart of the constellation Thorvald, a star grouping shaped like a hammer. Thorvald was a Lunar name. The Seelie called those same stars Ord.

Tomorrow crossed to the bureau and opened the top drawer. A handful of wyvern coins rolled about beside a corked vial. The glass was clear, revealing the gilded liquid inside: fairy wine. She was familiar with the powerful substance that enabled even non-mages to cast spells and work glamours. Her grandmother had purchased it in generous quantities to help put her on her feet again.

Remembering high fevers and begging for death, she wiped clammy hands off on her skirts. Shoving the worst of the memories down deep and far away, she brought him the vial. When he opened it, the smell of dead leaves and overly ripe fruit overwhelmed her senses. He drank it, scowling. She remembered that tart taste, sympathetically recalling a hint of it on her own tongue from when her grandmother had tried desperately to strengthen her waning body.

"Now for the hard part," he said, dropping the empty vial on the rug.

He took the hilt of the dagger in his hand. His big fist trembled. He gave it a tug, and the wound squelched. Tomorrow shut her eyes. He sucked in a shaky breath through his teeth, and she sensed his hesitation.

"I've got you," she said. She reached for him, accidentally bumping his horns with blind grasping fingers. Horns were an intimate part of a fae and could be

very sensitive. She jerked her hands back with a mumbled apology before trying again, reaching lower this time. She found his shoulder and followed his arm down. The coiled muscles there were as solid as sculpted marble under the broadcloth of his shirt.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice ragged with pain.

“Helping,” she said, finally finding his free hand with hers. Eyes shut tight and nose scrunched, she laced her fingers with his bulky ones and gave them an affectionate pump. “You can do this, Darko. I’m with you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

The duke exhaled slowly. He squeezed her hand hard, and she heard him jerk on the blade. He moaned softly, and her gut churned with sympathy for him. Another grunt of effort and a wet squelch followed. Tomorrow gritted her teeth, holding his tremoring hand between both of hers. His skin was tough and warm.

“You’re going to have to pull it out the rest of the way for me,” he whispered.

“I hope you’re teasing.” Tomorrow worked her throat. “If it’s left to me, you’re just going to have to grow accustomed to having a blade in your leg for the rest of your immortality. I’m certain someone can alter your clothing to accommodate it.”

“I am teasing,” he said as the dagger thudded onto the rug. Dragon blood magic burned hot in her nostrils, and then the duke heaved a great sigh.

“Is it done?” she asked, peeking at him through one slitted eye.

Darko nodded. “It’s over. The pain is receding.”

Tomorrow relaxed her shoulders and opened her eyes fully. His wound was already scarring over. Nothing but a black-soaked hole in the wool of his trousers remained to tell of the damage done.

She gave his hand an encouraging shake. “Well done, you. I knew you could do it.”

The pad of his thumb skimmed over her sore knuckles, and something softened in his expression. She’d seen him gentle toward her earlier in the night, but that look hadn’t been quite the same as this one. His expression had been fueled by pity before.

This was different. Gratitude mixed with something that made her toes curl in her boots.

“Thank you,” he said, his guttural accent more charming when it wasn’t strained with agony.

Movement at the window stole her attention. Something fluttered across her peripheral.

“Was that a fairy child?” Tomorrow’s jaw went slack. “Divines above, there’s another one!”

The first of the rare creatures flittered by on gossamer wings, her skin sable, her hair silver. The second was pleasantly plump with rosy cheeks, large bug-like eyes, and wispy ginger hair. She flew past the window with long leathery wings like a bat. Both had taloned feet and were small enough they’d fit easily in the palm of Tomorrow’s hand.

“I keep a sanctuary here for them,” Darko explained. “It’s not safe for fairies, especially in the Unseelie Provinces. The wine made from their blood is too ruthlessly sought after. I could introduce you to them if—”

“Yes!” Tomorrow said quickly, jetting for the door.

“Wait—”

She was outside in the meadow a heartbeat later, feet sinking into piles of lush grass, the caution in his tone forgotten in her excitement. Fairy children were so incredibly rare. She couldn’t wait to meet them.

The girls were tiny and precious with their large eyes and bell-like voices. She cooed at them. Four of the little beings bounced about on the purple petal of a giant fae flower, chattering at each other in their strange language.

Darko ducked through the doorway to join her. He moved slowly at first, but by the time he reached them in the grass, his steps were more assured.

“Girls,” he said in greeting, his voice a low rumble.

The fairy with sable skin abandoned her petal to meet him. “Bebebebebebe,” she buzzed. The fairy threw her arms wide, hugging his neck.

“Hello, Bebe,” he purred. Then his eyes snapped to Tomorrow’s side and narrowed. “Ruby,” he scolded. “No biting.”

Tomorrow jumped. The ginger fairy hovered near her arm, her mouth wide open, revealing sharp needly teeth ready to chomp down on Tomorrow’s elbow.

“Oh my,” Tomorrow panted, and the fairy’s face fell. Ruby stuck her tiny lip out, and Tomorrow’s heart squeezed. “I’m sorry, dove. You startled me, is all.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Darko grouched. “She knows she’s not supposed to bite friends.”

“Aww,” Tomorrow clucked, extending her hand in consolation to the pouting fairy. Ruby chittered and chirruped forlornly, but she came to stand on Tomorrow’s offered palm. The fairy’s talons mildly pricked her skin. “I bet you didn’t mean anything by it.”

Ruby nodded her diamond-shaped head. Her sharp chin trembled.

Darko rolled his eyes.

“I have a cat at home who only ever bites the people and things he loves the very most,” Tomorrow insisted.

“Itty kitty,” Ruby said, her voice low and raspy. “Yum, yum?” She rubbed her round belly.

“No, I didn’t eat him,” Tomorrow said.

“When you say cat,” Darko wondered, “do you mean tiger?”

Tomorrow nodded. Seelie rode great tigers across their provinces the way the Lunar fae rode horses. “Rowyn is his name,” she said fondly to the fairy. “He gives me love bites all the time, and he has a bright red coat similar to your lovely hair.”

Ruby blushed. “Is issa kitty?”

“You want to know where he is?” Tomorrow guessed. “He’s an old man now. I left him at home with my gran. His aging bones can’t handle the cold here at the Lunar Court. It’s warmer up north under the cover of the immortal trees.”

“Beeeeeeee,” Bebe squealed, sliding down the plates of Darko’s powerful tail with her hands thrown in the air. When she hit the bottom, she flew up to his shoulder and perched there, watching their new visitor.

“My name is Tomorrow,” she said to the girls as they gathered around her, the collective whisper of their beating wings creating a faint droning.

“Rower,” Ruby chimed.

“Rower,” the other girls echoed as they investigated Tomorrow, running clawed fingers through her white hair. The hum of their wings teased the points of her ears. She struggled to hold still while they inspected her. Their tiny touches made her squirm.

“Don’t let them walk all over you,” Darko warned. “They’re not toys, and—like you—they’re much fiercer than they look.”

“Ha.” Tomorrow shot him a grin. “No one’s ever called me fierce before.”

The girls closed in around her, allowing her to inspect them back. She ran her fingers over the flower petals that made their clothing and the thin wisps of their hair like spider silk. Moments later, she rolled in the grass, allowing the fairy children to literally walk all over her.

“Tomorrow,” Darko scolded.

“I can’t help it,” she said, giggling. “They’re so very precious—Ack,” she choked when Ruby accidentally stepped in her mouth. The ginger fairy’s chortle was gravelly as she pulled her foot out. The girls tickled her belly with their taloned toes, bouncing lightly down her abdomen, poking at the horn buttons of her borrowed coat. Tomorrow laughed until her sides ached.

When she sat up finally, one of them had tied several strands of her hair into knots. She tucked the frizzy mess behind her ear to deal with later.

Darko looked exhausted. His eyes were glassy and tired, but he waited on her without comment while Bebe braided a section of bronze hair around his left horn. His arms hung limply at his sides.

“I’d better get him to his bed,” Tomorrow told Ruby.

The fairy stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at her. Tiny droplets of spittle landed on Tomorrow’s cheek.

“Ruby doesn’t like saying goodbye,” Darko explained.

“Ah.” Tomorrow extended one of her fingers to the fairy. “How about a love bite instead? Just a small one to remember you by, and no blood please.”

Ruby’s responding grin was shark-like and went straight to Tomorrow’s heart. The Seelie had an affinity with nature and its creatures. Even with only a portion of Seelie blood in her ancestry, she liked ferocious things, and they always seemed to like her back.

Ruby chomped down affectionately on the end of her finger, hard enough to bring water to Tomorrow’s eyes. She hissed in a breath, but the sting was gone in a second.

Ruby beamed at her, pearly needle-like teeth gleaming. The pinch of pain was worth it for that.

Darko shook his head in admonishment, but there was a secret smile in the corner of his mouth. He helped Tomorrow to her feet, pausing a moment to pull blades of grass out of her knotted hair. The girls took turns squeezing his neck

in farewell. All except for Ruby, who blew a big wet raspberry at him before flying off toward the waterfall.

Tomorrow rose on her tiptoes to finger the fine braid near his horns. The duke pretended not to notice her interest. He pretended poorly. The subtle curve in the corner of his mouth spoke loudly of his pride and fondness for the fairy girls he'd made a home for.

"You're not scary at all, are you?" she teased.

The duke faced her fully. He lowered his big head and leered, displaying all his sharp teeth. His powerful tail thumped against the ground so hard she felt it reverberate beneath her feet. He was so close his breath blew hot against her scalp. "You tell me, little woman. Am I scary?"

His gravelly voice lifted the hair on her arms. He was big and broad and otherworldly. So big under the dusky magical light, he cast a shadow over her entire person.

"I stand corrected." Tomorrow gulped. "You're terrifying."

* * *

Dark

The duke led the way to the sandstone tower. Tomorrow kept behind him at a distance, her posture stiff and uneasy. He felt guilty for intimidating her again, but she needed to understand that he was trouble. Danger clung to him. She should be wary.

Hand swallowing up the brass knob, he hesitated there. Something was churning in his instincts. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Everything all right?" she asked. Faced with his distress, her wariness seemed to melt away, replaced with a reassuring smirk that was pure sunlight. If it were possible to capture the sparkle in her, he'd hoard it without question. It would outshine any gem he had amongst his possessions. Dragons longed for things that were rare and precious. The sunshine in her was one of a kind.

"Everything is fine," he said, reluctantly opening the door, revealing the near-darkness of the bedroom inside. He frowned at her back as she hoisted her skirts up to her ankles and crossed the threshold, leaving the confines of his sacred

space. Leaving his hoard for an exposed place where anyone could find her to collect her brightness for themselves.

His teeth ground together.

“Well,” she said, padding over to the bedroom door, “goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight,” he growled, suddenly feeling grumpier than he had before with a dagger in his leg. He thought of her rolling in the grass with his fairies, delight making her glow from the inside out, and his heart pitter-pattered in the most pathetic way.

Her hand connected with the knob, rattling the brass, but then she released it. His mood improved slightly.

Head down, she worried her skirts with her fingers. Her knuckles were colorful and a little swollen. He’d thought they’d heal quickly, as any immortal’s would, but now he regretted not tending to them when he had fairy wine in his system. He’d never had a skill for the healing arts, but with that powerful substance flowing through his veins, he could have managed it.

“Tomorrow?” He moved to the center of the room. The side of her face was illuminated by soft candlelight. Some of his blood had gotten on her skirt earlier, leaving an inky smear near the hem.

“Please don’t make me go to my room,” she whispered. “There were four of those brutes after me tonight, and I can’t stop wondering if there’s even more nearby. I thought I was safe here. I thought no one would dare come for me at The Boot. Now I think if I’m alone, I’ll just jump at the sight of my own shadow and hear nefarious noises every time the house creaks.”

He was about to respond, but she pressed on, cutting him off.

“I won’t bother you if you let me stay!” Tomorrow crossed to the armchair by the coal-burning stove. She patted the fur blanket draped over the back of it. “I can sleep right here, out of the way. I don’t take up much space.”

Dark’s mouth opened. “We’re—”

“And I promise I won’t talk too much,” she added hurriedly.

His lips quirked. “I don’t believe you.”

Tomorrow’s eyes went round. After a moment, she chuckled. “You’re right, Darko. I might talk too much—might be talking too much right now.”

“If we’re to be pretend lovers,” he said matter-of-factly, “it only makes sense that we’d share a room. And you might as well call me Dark. Most people do.”

"It would aid our deception." The forlorn look that had tugged at his heart vanished in a blink. She smiled ruefully. "Ha. Now I'm wishing I'd thought of that before I confessed to being a coward, scared of shadows and small noises. You probably already know what they say about hindsight, so I won't go into that."

"I don't think you're a coward," he confessed, and Tomorrow cocked her head to the side. On the contrary, considering how she'd handled herself when faced with an iron weapon, he thought her quite brave. "I appreciate your honesty, even if you only tell the truth because you can't stop the words from pouring out of your mouth."

"Thank you, er, I think." Coyly, she pushed errant strands of snowy hair behind her ear. Her fingers caught in the snarls his girls had made. She set to untangling them one at a time, unpicking the knots into a frizzy nest. When she finished, her ragged hair stood out in different directions. She looked like she'd been struck by lightning. He coughed into his fist, concealing a snicker.

As he readied for bed, she removed his coat, then made herself comfortable in the chair, pulling the heavy blanket over her. She undressed beneath it. Her modesty amused him. Modesty was generally a mortal trait, but he supposed that, given her ancestry, she might just be mostly mortal. He gave her privacy without commentary before blowing out the last of the candles.

He found his bed in the dark, then slid under the covers, resting his head on a generous stack of pillows. The silence felt heavy, disturbed only by the sound of air passing through his own lungs and the crackle of burning coals in the stove.

"Sleep well, Dark," she whispered, sweetness clinging to each word so prominently he could taste it. Tomorrow was honey incarnate.

"Sleep well," he said, voice thick and dreamy. "And worry no more. You're safe here with me from shadows, small noises, and scoundrels."

The room fell quiet again, but the silence didn't hold. Tomorrow shifted in the chair. Wooden legs scratched the floor rug. She moved again, throwing her weight back, her nervous wriggling growing more pronounced.

His eyes popped open. "Though you are politely keeping your nervous thoughts inside your mouth, I can still hear them," he grumbled.

"Ugh. I'm sorry . . ." The sound of her wrestling with the fur blanket drifted toward him, followed by more groaning wood and shuffling linen.

He blinked at the ceiling, tired eyes burning. "Perhaps if you said the thoughts out loud . . ." he suggested, certain he'd never get any sleep otherwise.

"Could I relight a candle?" Her voice was small. "Just one."

The worry in her tone tugged at his heart. "Ignite as many as you wish," he said gently. "I'll close the curtains if the light is too much for me."

"Thank you," she breathed.

She relit every candle in the room. Normally that much illumination would have disturbed him, but he was so exhausted, the moment she settled in her chair and quieted, he drifted off.

* * *

Dark had become the lightest of sleepers during the great war centuries ago. A dragon never could be too careful. He'd been as frightened by his father's soldiers at his back as he was by the Unseelie enemy before him. Inside his own ranks, he had to be ready to thwart the challenge of another dragon who wished to claim his title. He'd survived surrounded by dangers on all sides.

Though the movement in the corner of his bed was minimal, it still jerked him out of deep slumber. He sat up in near-darkness. Most of the candles had burned out, but a few flickered dully.

He squinted at the bundle of fur curled up in a ball at the foot of his bed.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Tomorrow said quietly, hugging her knees to her chest. "This bed is so big, I thought if I kept down here out of your way, you wouldn't even notice."

He grunted at her, his thoughts clearing listlessly. The room was warm, but she was shivering under the heavy fur. Tonight wasn't the first time someone had made an attempt on her life, he remembered. He understood better than most how the weight of constant threat could press against a person and deprive them of peace.

"You're seeing monsters in the shadows?" he guessed.

"Yes." Another full-body shiver shook her.

"But I'm scarier than those monsters," he reminded her.

"Scariest monster around. Imaginary or otherwise." Her grin was hidden by the fur, but he heard it in her words.

When he laid a hand on her slender shoulder, she startled.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he soothed. He pulled her quaking body up the bed, toward the pillows. With his tail, he tugged down a corner of the covers for her.

"I really didn't mean to be such a bother—"

"Shh." He helped her under the blankets, his uncoiling tail tucking the bedding beneath her chin.

She stopped shivering. Just like she'd promised, she took up hardly any space at all. He slid down beside her. The moment his cheek reunited with his pillow, he fell asleep.

Chapter 4



Dark

Despite the interruptions early on, Dark awoke from the most restful slumber of his life. His tail felt a bit numb at his back, but that was a common occurrence. He often rolled onto it during the night. It was nothing a few stretches couldn't make right.

Tomorrow's slight form nuzzled into his side. He froze there, not wanting to disturb her. Her cheek lay on his arm, its weight insignificant but her skin so satiny soft it gave him pause.

She wore only her linen shift, and like all of her clothes, it was too big for her. The lacy straps slipped down her arms, showcasing creamy skin and the constellation of freckles gathered on her shoulders and just below her throat. He wondered, if he followed each bronze star that dotted her flesh, would it make a sky sign he recognized? He loved constellations and the stories they told. His knowledge of them had been one of the reasons he'd chosen the Lunar Province for his home. Their court favored the stars as much as he did.

What stories did Tomorrow hold?

A light rap at the door called his attention away from the woman in his bed.

"Enter," he said, voice still thick with sleep.

He'd expected to see the maid, coming to collect laundry and deliver more coal for the stove, but Margot stuck her head inside. Brunette curls tumbled from their pins, evidence of a very eventful night. She wore an apron pulled hastily over her day dress.

"Morning, Dark." She shuffled inside, hoisting two pails.

Dark squinted at her. "Aren't you a little too high up the chain of command in *your* house to be doing a maid's work?"

She lumbered to the stove and pulled open the ash door using a thick mitten removed from her apron pocket. "Clever you. You caught me." The smirk she sent him was full of mischief. "I wanted to check on you after last night. You had that dagger in your leg and all, but you seem well now. *Very well.*" She glanced at Tomorrow's sleeping form and waggled her brows at him.

Dark slid a hand under his neck, propping up his head. "And?" he prompted, sensing there was more to it. There was always more with Margot. Margot and Susan were on a very, very short list of people he trusted, so he tolerated their games—mostly.

She shot him a wink. "When I heard Tomorrow's bed was empty this morning, I bet Susie she was in yours. Now I get to go collect the half-piece she owes me."

Margot raked ash and debris into one of the pails. She added fresh coals to the stove from the second pail.

Tomorrow stirred and stretched in the bed beside the duke. "Margot?" she said dreamily.

"Yes, love?" Margot said, chipper as a songbird.

Tomorrow rubbed the sleep from her copper eyes with her palms. "Would you kindly tell everyone you see that you found me in the duke's bed? Help us spread our deception about."

Margot saluted her playfully. "I'll tell every soul with ears."

Knowing what he did of Tomorrow's modesty, Dark sensed she would soon regret asking this of the courtesan.

"Thank you," Tomorrow said, and she wriggled under the covers, muttering softly, like she'd gotten herself tangled in the bedding.

"Susie and I will be dining at the House of Night this morning. It's late supper for the nocturnal population, early breakfast for the likes of us. The king and queen won't be there. I believe they're traveling, but plenty of diplomats and high-bred sorts love to dine at their home when court hosts. Including," Margot said pointedly, "the Earl of Westarow and his family."

"The executor of my father's estate?" Tomorrow struggled to sit up.

"Right you are. If the pair of you would like to tag along, meet us up in the foyer within the hour. Wear something dashing." As she left, Margot shut the door behind her.

Tomorrow grappled under the covers once more.

"Everything all right over there?" Dark asked.

"Um, yes," she said softly, face reddening. "But if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to leave the bed soon so I can attend to my morning ablutions. I think it's a good idea that we go to dine with them."

"By all means." He motioned for her to depart. When she didn't, he wondered if shyness made her hesitant. Perhaps she needed him to clear out first.

Tomorrow pushed the blankets down in answer, revealing his tail coiled around her waist and hips, holding her in place.

Dark's eyes went wide. That explained why it felt numb this morning. Without him realizing, he'd wound it around her while they slept. She'd lain on it all night.

At his command, it loosened, parting from her sluggishly.

"I apologize," he said meekly. His tail stung like pins and needles throughout the scaled shaft as blood flow returned. "It doesn't usually do that."

He was a befuddled dragon again. His tail, an intimate part of him, didn't act of its own accord.

Not unless . . .

Tomorrow's answering chortle was forgiving as she left the bed. "It's not a problem. I didn't mind. In fact, I'm grateful. It brought me comfort in the night when I wanted to jump at my own shadow. Besides, I'm the one who crawled into bed with you, as I'm sure you recall."

"Mate," he murmured to himself.

"What was that?" she asked, crossing the room to gather her clothing off the floor.

"No matter," he added quickly.

He felt it then, felt her. She triggered the tiniest pull in his heart, a movement in his instincts just as soft and gentle as the woman before him. *Mate*, his soul whispered. This little woman was a match. Compatible.

He'd met many matches over the years. They'd all been Unseelie like himself. In the mountains, tradition mattered most. A relationship with them required him to constantly prove his strength, as was the way between dragons. Growing a bond into a true mate connection would be an uphill battle for dominance, so

he'd avoided them from the onset. Dark didn't want battle, had never wanted it. When he'd left the Unseelie provinces, he'd put war behind him for good.

Now all he craved was peace. Peace and sweetness.

Tomorrow combed her fingers through her untamed hair, trying to flatten it. "You're certain you're all right with dining now?" she asked, misinterpreting his troubled expression.

"Positive," he said gruffly.

"Is it too soon? A lot happened last night. We could wait for the next occasion to flash our false romance. I'm certain there will be ample opportunity. Susan and Margot are popular. They're constantly invited to things."

"I'm fine," he insisted. "I've been to the House of Night before as a guest of the king and queen. The food will be wonderful, and the company I plan to keep better still."

Sunshine burned in her easy smile, so bright, so warm, it stole his breath.

Mate, his instincts whispered a little louder this time.

* * *

Dark retreated to his hoard to dress. While he was there, he fetched a luxurious item from the trunk at the top of his astronomy tower. An item that had once belonged to his sister, Sora Yaga, the Unseelie monarch, but it hadn't fit her well after she'd had it made. It'd been cut too short. She wouldn't miss it. She hadn't come looking for it after all this time—he doubted she'd start now.

Dark turned the knob at the tower door until it clicked three times. He knocked before opening it. The doorway moved where he wanted it to, but it always required that it rest in a room he was familiar with and could recall in detail. When he'd first arrived, there hadn't been a room for him. Susan had lent him hers and roomed with Margot until one became available.

"Come in," Susan called.

Dark stepped out of the madam's bedroom closet to join her, holding the formal dress over his arm.

"Oh, that's lovely," Susan said. She stood before the vanity mirror, attaching a dangly pearlescent earring to her ear, watching him in the reflective glass.

Dark held the gown up for her inspection. It was bright gold and trimmed in red taffeta. It reminded him of a sunrise. "Would you please give this to Tomorrow. The clothes she's borrowed don't fit her . . . You need not mention where it came from."

He wanted to see Tomorrow in the gown for reasons he had no business dwelling on, since their relationship was a farce.

"Why, certainly. Just set it on the bed behind you there," Susan said. "It's a bit fancy for a Lunar supper, but it's stunning. She'll draw a lot of eyes, and that's the point of your plot, isn't it?"

Dark draped the dress along the bottom of the bed, leaving her question unanswered. He turned back for the door.

"Did it come from your hoard there?" she asked, a sparkle of interest glittering in her blue gaze as she slid the back of her earring into place.

"It did," he answered cautiously.

"I didn't realize dragons gave gifts from their precious hoards. Isn't that a very, very *special* thing?"

He paused and looked back to find her studying him still. "The dress wasn't mine."

He'd kept it because the fabrics were very expensive and the embroidery rare and . . . *it didn't matter why else*. Irritation had his next breath heating in his nose, threatening to steam.

"Aren't things in hoards usually collected from someone else?" she continued. "Technically none of them were yours originally, yes?"

"You ask too many questions," he growled.

"One more thing, Darko, before you go," she said, ignoring the warning in his tone. Her smirk was all-knowing. "Why is it you can't simply give her this beautiful dress yourself, I wonder? Sweet girl like Tomorrow would be so grateful."

Dark rolled his eyes. "You and Margot have another bet going, don't you? Now you're pumping me for information."

Susan shrugged. "Always."

"Mind your business, Susie." His fingers flexed at his sides. "And give the girl the damn dress, please."

She kept her knowing gaze fixed on him, unmoved by his grumpiness. "I just can't think of a reason why someone would hide a nice thing he was doing for another out of the abundant kindness of his heart." The duke scoffed at that, but she pressed on, "Unless, of course, he had certain feelings for said person brewing deep inside him, like, and he wasn't quite ready to share those."

"This is just a little gift of appreciation for the woman who saved me from an iron blade. Nothing more," he drawled.

"Uh-huh," Susie said, not sounding at all convinced. "Brewing deep, *deep* inside him, like. So deep he isn't quite ready to share it with himself fully either, I think."

Dark ground his teeth at her. "Not ready to share," he stressed, "not even with you."

"That's all I needed to hear, dear," she said smugly.

Dark stomped from her room, grumbling under his breath about the nosiness of women.

* * *

Half an hour later, Dark waited at the bottom of the stairs near the entryway. Earlier, Susan had taken Tomorrow to her room to put on the new dress. Susie had returned. Tomorrow would shortly follow, he'd been told.

"You wouldn't believe the depravity I walked in on this morning." Margot regaled the footmen at the door of the Gilded Boot with her tale as she and Susan donned their coats and gloves.

"Do tell," Susan said playfully. She was clearly as in on the deception as her partner was.

Dark resisted the urge to scoff at them. For some foolish reason, waiting for Tomorrow had his stomach in knots. He straightened the lapel of his frock coat, then straightened it again, busying his hands. Tomorrow's scent lingered in it: morning dew and almond soap.

Margot whispered loudly, "Our little Tomorrow had her legs wrapped around the head of the duke like a python in a fig tree. It was most impressive."

The image that flooded Dark's mind made his gut flex pleasantly.

Ready for travel in winter weather, Margot and Susan came to join him just as Tomorrow reached the top of the stairs. Dark's gaze lifted. It found hers and fell instantly captive.

She sparkled.

The Duke made a noise, his next intake of breath drawing eyes—smug, all-knowing eyes—from the pair nearest him. Tomorrow beamed down at Dark as she descended the stairs, color staining her cheeks.

"Hear that?" Susie murmured to her partner. "Might as well give me my half-piece now."

"Attraction," Margot hissed, "isn't the same thing. You don't win yet."

Dark glared at the two of them. "You're both shameless."

"Why thank you, Your Grace," Margot said with a playful curtsy.

"Comes with the territory," Susan said.

"We only make bets because we care," Margot insisted.

Dark abandoned them to meet Tomorrow partway up the steps. He extended his gloved hand, and she took it, her dainty fingers swallowed up by his fist. The gold of the dress complimented her creamy skin, and the red taffeta did lovely things to her copper eyes. She had pearls dotting her hair that she'd pinned back in a creative twist.

"Sunshine," he cooed, "you're as brilliant as a drop of pure star fire."

The stain on her cheeks darkened. Even the points of her ears turned a charming red. "A pet name. What a good idea," she said quietly, taking the rest of the stairs at his side. "Hm. I'll have to think up a fitting one for you now."

"Wicky Poo," Susan suggested.

"My pet," Margot added drolly.

Dark's gaze went heavenward, begging for patience from the rafters. He was less annoyed by their teasing and more bothered that Tomorrow believed his words were part of the ploy and not an honest reaction to the beauty of the inner light she radiated at everyone. Laughing, her arm curled around his. Her gentle touch in her buttery soft kid-skin gloves, combined with the melodious sound of her mirth, immediately cooled his irritation.

* * *

Snowfall slowed their travel. In the early morning twilight, under a purple sky full of fading stars, the coach pulled up to the manor of House Night. It was the favored home of the king and queen of the Lunar Court. The monarchs had several residences, including a palace in Maldrom, central to the province. They forewent that luxury to spend most of their time at this manor, in River Row.

Taking in the sights, Dark understood their choice. There was history in the intricate stonework of the columns and great peaked gables, more history in the wilderness around them. They had the beauty and seclusion of nature at their backs and the convenience of a wealthy city so close. There would hardly be any light pollution out here. He'd wager the star-gazing was lovely at darkest night when nocturnal Lunar fae were most active.

"My little cabbage," Margot suggested playfully, seated in the coach across from the duke. Neither courtesan had given up on their commitment to help Tomorrow select a proper pet name. Their suggestions had grown steadily more ridiculous along the way, trying to get a rise out of Dark.

It worked. He scoffed and groaned and glared at every silly submission.

"Nothing about Darko is little," Susan protested, sharing a winter quilt with her business partner. "It doesn't suit."

"But he likes cabbage," Margot insisted as the coach came to a stop in the drive, crunching slush and snow beneath its wheels. "He eats it in about everything."

Tomorrow sniggered. Pressed so close to Dark's dragon heat, she hadn't needed a quilt at all. Her hair smelled strongly of almond soap with a hint of citrus.

She scooted in closer, and the pleasant scent curled through him. "Have you tried pretending they don't bother you? Maybe if you stopped making it fun for them, they'd move on."

Dark grumbled low in his throat. "If I pretend they don't bother me, they'll just try harder. They're stubborn, these two."

"He's right, see. We do love a good challenge," Margot said, and Susan nodded her agreement. "And we ain't scared of him. He can threaten to eat us all he wants, and we won't flinch."

Susan gave his knee a consolatory pat. "Not that you aren't scary, Darko. Don't you worry." She shared a toothy grin with her partner. "Our friend, the

Bloody Queen of Night, is just scarier.”

“Much scarier,” Margot agreed.

Not wishing to encourage them further, Dark sucked in his cheeks to keep his lips from quirking. He opened the coach door and climbed out. One at a time, he helped the women down, handing them off to the row of footmen who lined the stone steps, ready for guests. They carried crescent-shaped lanterns to light the way.

Tomorrow tucked her hand into the crook of the duke’s arm, and he covered it with his own, enjoying drawing her close more than he ought to. This was a ruse, he reminded himself. A ploy. A plot. A—

Pinkened from the cold, Tomorrow’s skin was positively touchable.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she said resolutely from the stone steps. The snow fell gently around them, glittering brilliantly in the collective lanternlight, but not as brilliantly as the playful look that filled her cheeks once more. “Unless you were partial to ‘my little cabbage’? I’m willing to call you either.”

“Sweetheart is preferable,” he said, and he lowered his head the way any courting gentleman might, touching his brow to hers in a sign of fae affection as old as time.

He did it for their audience, of course.

Not because he wanted to.

Mate, his soul whispered.

“Very convincing,” Margot teased.

At his glower, Margot and Susan burst into giggles, then hurried up the steps toward heavy double doors pulled wide by guardsmen in midnight-blue mage uniforms.

The foyer revealed an arched ceiling and a long corridor dotted with oil paintings and ancient hangings, a mating of new and old. Flanking the entryway, incense had been lit at both altars for the Divine Day and the Divine Night, blessing the guests who entered at twilight while the sun and moon were briefly joined.

Tomorrow squeezed his arm. He felt her distress in the touch, and he patted her fingers consolingly. Her heeled boots, damp with snow, skidded on the marble floors. Dark’s tail came up to brace her, curling briefly around her waist.

“Hm.” She grinned down at the coil of scales at her hip. “Well, aren’t you useful.”

“I’ve got you,” he said, echoing her words from the night before when she’d comforted him through his injury, and together they moved through the corridor into a ballroom elegantly transformed into a formal dining hall full of tables and high-backed chairs. Gilded chandeliers decorated the ceilings. A quartet played string music. Most of the guests stood, holding small plates of food or chilled glasses of champagne while they conversed.

“There he is,” Tomorrow said, tugging Dark to a standstill. “The Earl of Westarow— No, don’t let him see you staring.”

He followed her gesture to a far table. A lunar gentleman sat tall and lean in a chair so heavily varnished it gleamed. Short, twisted horns stood out from his honey-colored hair. A tail like a lion draped at his side.

“Now I’m wishing we’d concocted more of a plan,” Dark confessed.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Tomorrow said. “We were all in a rush to arrive on time. We should have discussed what comes next.”

“The earl is looking this way now.” Dark turned her so that she was flush with him. “Is there some sort of Seelie tradition that might make this all more credible? How do your people declare themselves?”

Dragons usually gave gifts during courting, but making a show of that would require more forethought.

“I know just the thing,” she said, lowering her voice.

“What is it?” He leaned in close to hear her better.

“Brace yourself,” she warned, then she rose up on the tips of her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Dark froze, taken aback. And then the sensation of her mouth pillowing against his, the hum of life under her skin, the taste of mint and hot flesh, drowned out his surprise. His hands moved, filling up with her, skimming lace and taffeta to find more of her precious skin above the low neckline. He caressed the flesh at her throat, trailing downward to the delicate hollow of her collarbone, gratified by the way she shivered. Dark encircled her with his arms, cupping her close.

Her lips moved with his, vibrant and lush—as sweet as Rasika berry pie—and when she slowed the kiss, he took over, turning the endearing declaration into

something deeper, something that fed the growing need inside him and caused his heart to thunder in his chest.

Here's your peace, his instincts told him. Here was sweet tenderness. Here's where thirst was slaked. Hunger sated.

Tomorrow pulled away, breathless and flushed.

"Ahem," came a voice at Dark's side. A guard in a woolen tunic that marked him as a mage stood with his hands laced in front of him. A Lunar fae, he had curled horns, a broad build, and a long leathery tail that swished at his back.

"Problem?" Dark's voice was husky.

"Your Grace." The Lunar guard gave a tiny bow, clicking his heels together. "Your presence is requested by the Queen of Night."

"I wasn't aware she was home this morning." Dark rested an arm possessively across Tomorrow's shoulders. "Lead the way and we'll follow."

The guard shook his head. "Respectfully, Your Grace, only you were requested by Her Majesty."

Knowing how nervous Tomorrow was, he didn't want to leave her.

Her expression betrayed the tiniest insecurity and then her face smoothed. "I doubt anything will happen to me, not here of all places," she said with confidence. "I'll sit with Margot and Susan. Come and find us when you're through."

Chapter 5



Dark

Dark followed the guard to a small library that smelled of vellum and wax paper, lit with gaslights and full of soft, well-used furniture. The walls were decorated in Lunar magic charts, drawings of hands in different positions for calling moon magic to the caster.

Queen Rain balanced on a chair, reaching for a higher shelf. On the side table behind her, she'd piled stacks of books as tall as she was short. Most of them were written in an archaic script he recognized as elven.

It was always a pleasant surprise to share a space with the infamous Bloody Queen of Night. She was Seelie small, white-haired, and unexpected in every way. She had the sculpted limbs of a practiced warrior and the scars to match. A slash of puckered skin marred her throat. Discolored gashes lined the knuckles of her fingers—injuries common in dagger fighting. She did not have the boisterous nature of the other warriors Dark had come to know. Instead, she possessed a quiet and reserved spirit.

She was not a court beauty but was undoubtably striking in untraditional ways, wearing well the long woolen tunic of a soldier instead of petticoats and pearls. Her familiar, a demon trickster who took the form of a black cat, leapt onto the table beside her books, studying the duke with watchful yellow eyes. Sulfur, the scent of Hell, followed him.

"You may go, Arne," the queen said. Her voice was raspy through her scarred throat.

The mage guard hovered by the entryway for a moment before granting them privacy.

A casual onlooker might see the great duke looming over the small queen and think she was outmatched. But they'd be wrong. A trickster like Dark could transform into a dragon so large it would crush the manor flat, and there still wasn't a doubt in his mind that the queen could best him in any fight.

Rain was ancient, and she was a witch—an immortal who'd traded a piece of her soul to another with blood magic, bonding them. She and her demon had bested bigger dragons than him with those scarred hands of hers.

"Your Majesty," Dark greeted reverently, bowing low.

Rain reached over her head, retrieving a slender book from the shelf before acknowledging his words. "Darko." Her lilting accent of the north was more antiquated than Tomorrow's. "You are well, I hope?"

"I am." He came forward to brace the chair, stopping it from wobbling beneath her. "Will I get to enjoy your company this morning?"

"Crowded ballrooms aren't for me, I'm afraid. I prefer my company at a more intimate size." After a quick inspection, she shook her head at the volume in her hands and stretched to put it back.

Dark wasn't certain crowded ballrooms were for him either, but they had their purpose from time to time. In this case, he found it very convenient that he got to dress up Tomorrow in fine fabrics fit for royalty. "How can I be of service, Your Majesty?"

"First, if you would please." She jumped down lithely from her chair, pointing at the next book she wanted, a large leather-bound tome.

Dark reached it easily, standing flat-footed, and handed it down to her.

The queen accepted it in both hands. She blew dust off the cover. "You know, you may call me Rain, if you wish," she said, dropping the new book beside her familiar. The cat lurched out of the way, hissing at her. Rain's lips twitched. "Your sister called me Rain even before she was queen."

Dark chortled. "My sister does as she pleases."

Rain nodded knowingly. "Sora's good at that. She's the reason I asked for you, actually. She sent me a letter with a request in exchange for the information I required."

"A boon for a boon," Dark grunted.

It was the way between dragons. The Seelie prized family and blood ties above all else, and the Lunar fae valued academia and magic, but the Unseelie saw

favor only in what another could accomplish for them. Sora Yaga was on the very short list of people Dark trusted, but only most of the time.

“She’s worried for you and hoped I could help you make new acquaintances here amongst the Lunar Court. I don’t know your preferences, but there are a few lovely men and women I could introduce you to if you find yourself in need of company.”

Dark’s chin dropped, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “My sister isn’t worried about my wellbeing. She’s worried I’m not being useful. I’d be more helpful if I was married to a titled person who brought the Yaga name more power instead of hiding out in a brothel away from all the political gaming and backstabbing that is her life.”

The queen stroked the bushy black coat of her demon familiar, her expression patient. “Sora wears a mask at times, I think. It’s heavy and hard and plated like armor because it has had to be, but her heart is very giving. Much more so than she’d like others to see.”

Her words surprised the duke. It fascinated him that this warrior witch who had survived many battles, bloodied her hands countless times, went face to face with darkest evil and lived to tell the tale, could still have such an optimistic view of others.

He wanted Rain’s opinion of Sora to be true. Certainly, his sister was not the tyrant their father had been. She’d cared for Dark as a hatchling after his Lunar mother had died, had made efforts to shield him from their father’s worst, but ‘giving’ was not the word he would ever use to describe her. There may have been glimpses of decency there, but only glimpses.

“You need not parade me in front of your friends,” Dark said, pushing the snarl from his words out of respect for Rain. “Tell my sister I attended your fae feast this morning with a lovely Seelie duchess on my arm.”

“A lovely *Seelie* duchess?” Rain’s white brows lifted toward her hairline. “I could tell her that?”

“You could. And you would not be lying, though technically the inheritance of the Duke of Easton still remains in trust. Tomorrow is the daughter of the duke, and she is lovely.”

“How delightful,” Rain cooed.

The Seelie Tree Court and the Unseelie Mountain Court had such a tumultuous history, news of his relationship with Tomorrow—though a secret farce—would draw much attention.

“Well,” Rain said thoughtfully, shifting in closer to her cat, “it’s a shame I won’t be able to take credit for the match, but I do look forward to sharing the news all the same.”

“Technically the credit is yours, Rain,” he said, practicing the use of her informal name and finding he liked it. “The friends you introduced me to, Susan and Margot, were responsible for our meeting.”

“Ah, did you hear that, Bernard? We had a role after all,” she said to her demon, toying with the end of his tail. “We’d never been asked to play matchmaker before. It was a nice change, being a part of something lovely instead of something bloody.” She glanced at Dark, amber eyes glittering. “I’m usually called on to hurt people.”

“You’re very good at hurting people,” he said fondly.

The queen’s attention returned to the bookshelf, scanning the spines. “There’s one last matter I hoped to discuss with you before I release you to your Seelie escort. Sora mentioned you would know best.”

“By all means. My time is yours,” he said politely, longing to be back at Tomorrow’s side. He didn’t like leaving her waiting.

“Bernard and I took in a ward a while ago. A very special little girl,” she said, selecting a thick volume with a gilded title on the cover. It too was written in elven, but the silhouette of a fairy was cut into the leather. “Clapa, our ward, won’t be a fairy child much longer, I fear. She’s been going off on her own for greater periods of time. She always comes back, but it’s clear she’s maturing. She’s explained to Bernard that she’ll need the help of other fairies to . . . I’m not quite sure how to explain it . . . nest?”

Dark was familiar with the process. “Fairies cocoon like a butterfly during the final stages of their development from child to adult.”

“Yes! Sora mentioned that you know where there’s a sanctuary for them. It’s a great relief that you’re knowledgeable about all of this. We love her dearly, but there’s much we don’t understand, and the beings are so rare it’s difficult to find credible information.”

"I'd be more than happy to introduce her to my friends. They're always ready to help a fellow fairy, especially a child."

Rain swallowed, and her next words were tight. "Bernard and I have been a bit nervous that once she's completed this process, she'll want to remain with her kind. We'll understand that, of course. She has our support always, but . . . stars, we will miss her so." The queen's shoulders drooped, and Bernard yowled forlornly. She scratched under his chin to soothe him.

"Fairy values are a lot like the Seelie," Dark said gently. "Family is quite sacred to them. Only, the Seelie focus on blood ties and fairies do not."

"You mean their kin doesn't have to be related?" Rain clarified, pointing to herself and Bernard. "Like we aren't?"

"Bibka is the silly word my girls have invented in their tongue of broken Common. Not all fairies are bibka, and not all bibka are fairies," he explained.

"They choose their families," Rain said hopefully.

"I'm certain they do. I bring all sorts of things to the sanctuary for them to play with. Things to hunt and eat and trade and fashion into new items. Reptiles and amphibians seem to be a favorite, especially frogs and lizards. I brought them a giant tortoise once, but to my surprise, they never ate him. They care for him, cleaning his shell and feeding him the flowers they pick. They ride on his back and have declared him bibka. No one may hurt him."

"Fascinating."

"I am Pap bibka, but I'm still not certain what the designation entails. Whatever it is, it seems to have no impact on how well they listen to me," he said, chuckling. "They are fond of me, I think, but my words more often than not fall on tiny deaf ears."

Rain shared a knowing look with her demon cat. "That's an experience we can relate to."

"I don't think you or your familiar have anything to worry about. The other fairies will help Clapa ready her cocoon when the time is right. That seems to be a sacred thing they participate in all together as needed, but I doubt she'll want to remain anywhere other than here during the change. Maturing is a lengthy process, and although she'll be asleep inside for most of it, she'll still want you close. While she's so vulnerable, she'll want to be surrounded and protected by her chosen people."

"There you have it, Bernard," Rain said. Her amber gaze swam with unshed tears. "We were worried for nothing. We're her bibka."

The demon pawed at his mistress affectionately.

* * *

Tomorrow

Seated at a central table, Tomorrow couldn't shake the feeling that every gently-bred person behind her was staring at the back of her head. Suddenly, the dress which had felt so smooth on her skin a few minutes ago itched unpleasantly. The lace of the flounced sleeves tickled her arms. She couldn't get comfortable.

"Everything all right, love?" Margot asked. She and her business partner sat on either side of Tomorrow. She found reassurance in their nearness.

Tomorrow tugged at her sleeve. "I feel a bit like an imposter in this," she confessed quietly.

Susan slid an arm around the back of her chair. "But you aren't an imposter. That duchy is yours by right and by blood. There are just a few silly mortal hoops to jump through before you claim it."

"Hoops of mortal *men*," Margot said, her mouth full of bread. "Don't lump us all together with that lot. If they insist on having all the say, then they can keep all the blame, too."

Susan raised her glass of chilled champagne in agreement and drank to that.

Tomorrow studied the table of the Earl of Westarow and felt intimidated. He'd been a nice enough man when she'd met him before. Would he buy into her fake engagement with Dark? Would he create more hoops for her to jump through before she collected her inheritance? How much time did she have before the Freests did her in and won?

Though she hated to think on it, time was a commodity Tomorrow didn't have enough of. She needed her inheritance now, her revenge *now*.

The earl's family came to join him, a fae couple and their human daughter, a child no older than seven. It surprised her, seeing a fledgling at a formal feast of

all places. Children were often tucked out of the way by the gentry, never to be seen or heard until they'd aged appropriately.

Susan saw her staring and leaned in. "That's Jonas sitting across from your executor," she said of the Lunar fae with warm brown skin and bracketed horns. "He's good people. There's his wife, Frances. They're the Lord and Lady of Whiteholm, and that's their adopted daughter, Glasmorra, between them."

Glasmorra was the name of a Seelie nature goddess with black hair made of ravens' feathers. It suited the girl with her long unbound ebony locks and curious eyes. Her dress was a bright green. Glasmorra's blood was famously that same shade.

"You don't see too many children at events like this," Tomorrow noted.

"No, you don't," Margot chimed, "and it's a shame, really. Jonas is our friend. He and his wife had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that because they're immortal and their daughter is human, they'll have to lose her someday. It's the curse of time."

Tomorrow sucked in a breath, saddened by the notion. Time was such a brutal goddess. "How heartbreaking."

"It was, but instead of dwelling, they've decided to make every moment count." Margot lifted a champagne glass toward the couple's table in salute. She sipped it. "They take her everywhere with them so they won't miss a thing."

Tomorrow thought of her mother, a woman she knew only through the lovely stories her gran told, and her eyes stung. Though both of her parents had fae in their ancestry, neither of them had been immortal, but they'd carried in their blood the potential to pass on that blessing to their offspring. According to her gran, her mother had wanted that for Tomorrow, had prayed for it and purchased an assortment of good luck charms favored by humans to help make it happen. That's why she'd given her such a unique name: to tempt the divines into granting her that gift. She wanted her to always have the promise of tomorrow.

Now all Tomorrow had was her gran. She needed her revenge, not just for her own sake, but her gran's too, the only kin she had left.

The string music switched to a more festive tune, and some guests began to partner up and dance in the open space between the tables. Watching the others made Tomorrow's heart ache. She'd used to dance often before poison had

caused the illness that made her clumsy. Her feet slid along the floor beneath her, remembering the steps. Tomorrow picked at the lamb on the plate before her, not eating anything. She was beginning to notice the absence of her escort. She canted her head about the room, looking for him.

“Care to dance, cousin?” The voice at her side was syrupy.

Tomorrow froze. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention, and she felt the color draining from her face.

“Glen,” Tomorrow gasped.

“This is your horrible murdering cousin?” Susan shouted.

“You’re making a scene,” Lord Glen Freest said reprovably, alabaster face placidly pleasant. He waved off a concerned server who’d slowed his pace just then.

“You’re the one making a scene, you tosspot,” Susan spat.

“You just know he says that to all the ladies in his life,” Tomorrow said acidly. “Tells them they’re making a scene to keep them under his hairy thumb.”

Margot brandished the fork in her fist like it was a dagger. “You haven’t seen a fucking scene yet, you ugly little mop of a man. Come closer so I can get at your eyes, and I’ll show you a blimming scene.”

Contrary to Margot’s words, Lord Glen Freest was annoyingly handsome. Tall and lean like most Lunar fae, he had winter-blue hair that brought out the indigo in his gaze. His skin was an unblemished white. He wore a pin on his cravat with a stone as big and gaudy as his ego.

“Cousin,” he said through his teeth, “I need to have a word with you. It’s time we put things behind us once and for all and discussed matters like family. Let’s start with a friendly dance between—”

“I’ll dance with you, Mr. Freest,” the duke said darkly. Tomorrow’s arms pebbled at the power permeating his words.

Dark had finally returned, and Tomorrow’s cheeks hurt, her smile went so broad. It was a mystery how he’d managed to move across the ballroom soundlessly, as big as he was, but there he stood, casting a massive shadow over the very man who’d stolen so much from her, a shadow so threatening Glen lost his voice in the shade.

The duke stood so close Glen’s brow came level with Dark’s chin. Even as white as Glen’s skin was, he somehow paled further. His throat bobbed. “I

wanted a word with my cousin, Your Grace, but she keeps company with loud-mouthed—”

“Don’t finish that thought,” Dark said in a menacing tone that promised the most brutal violence.

Glen’s mouth opened to retort, then he seemed to think better of it. He straightened his cravat, thumbing the large stone under his neck. Nose high, he spun on his heel to depart.

Dark’s serpent-like tail snaked around Glen’s ankles, jerking his legs out from under him. Glen landed on the floor hard. A gasp went up in the room. Neighboring guests rose from their seats to stare. The music stopped.

Laughter cut through the shocked silence, and Tomorrow peered over at the executor’s table. The man named Jonas, the fae with the bracketed horns, laughed uproariously. His wife, an immortal woman with dark hair and pink skin, gently attempted to quiet him, though her mouth was in a revealing twist of its own.

As Dark’s tail retreated, Glen leapt to his feet. His placid expression faltered, hatred darkening his eyes. The emotion vanished in a blink, and Glen chuckled, waving off the group of guests expressing their concern. He held up a hand to the room, showing he was well. String music began again, floating through the ballroom.

“Very funny, my friend,” Glen said loudly, then he moved in closer and dropped his voice. “Were we anywhere else right now, I’d take you outside for a duel.”

Tomorrow gasped. Pistols were outlawed, but that didn’t stop them from circling through the provinces anyway.

Dark shrugged. “You can’t *take* me anywhere. I’ll go outside with you now, though, if you’d like. I don’t enjoy the taste of fae, but I’ll make an exception for you. I’m hungry enough.” His unfriendly smile widened to display all of his sharp teeth.

Glen scoffed. “You’re no gentleman.”

“Walk away now, little man, or the next time my tail wraps around something, it’ll be your scrawny neck.”

Glen took his time adjusting his cravat and the lapel of his paisley waistcoat. He glanced at Tomorrow, malice in the curl of his lip.

“Don’t look at her,” Dark rumbled.

Glen glared at the duke. “You think she’s your payday. She’s not. She’s an albatross.”

Tomorrow watched her cousin leave, her stomach plummeting. What little appetite she’d had was gone completely. Margot and Susan said calming things to her, but she couldn’t focus on their words. Her hands shook with rage. She tucked them under the table to hide them, but not before Dark noticed.

“Walk with me,” he said gently, extending his open palm to her.

Adrenaline had her heart thundering unevenly in her chest. The audacity of that horrid man ... She put her hand in the duke’s and felt reassurance in his strong grip. He helped her out of her seat, bracing her when she struggled to get her footing right. The outing and seeing her cousin again had made her tired. Her weaknesses were catching up to her, and there was still so much of the day left to endure.

Hugging Dark’s arm helped ground her. She could kiss the man, she was so grateful for him. He guided her in a slow lap around the ballroom, distracting her by sharing the conversation he’d had with the Queen of Night and the interesting things he’d learned about fairies over the years. Intrigued, she bombarded him with questions about his sanctuary for little girls. He didn’t seem to mind the onslaught.

“I told the queen about your plight,” he said evenly, “and about the scoundrels from last night.”

“Oh?”

“She’s going to look into it,” Dark explained.

Tomorrow frowned. She appreciated the thought, but she’d heard those words too many times from other authorities to get her hopes up. And surely a queen had even less time to spare for her than a constable.

Dark guided her back toward their table, just in time to catch Margot sharing something with another guest about pythons wrapped around a fig tree .

..

The duke promptly turned Tomorrow away from the table, declining to explain why he was suddenly in such a hurry.

A mortal man stepped into their path, dressed in a vibrant purple waistcoat and sporting a long decorative mustache. After exchanging a few pleasantries, he

extended his hand to Tomorrow. "May I have the next dance?"

It was the customary thing for a gentleman to do, but Tomorrow opened her mouth to make a polite excuse.

"Absolutely not," Dark snapped. His tail swept around her back, and he ushered her away from the dandy lord.

Tomorrow shot an apologetic smile behind her, hurrying to keep up with the duke's stomping. "Another excellent idea," she said quietly. "Pretending to be a possessive dragon. Makes our romance more convincing."

"Yes," Dark drawled. "*Pretending.*"

After another lap around the ballroom, they stopped and snacked in front of the wide glass windows that opened onto a balcony overlooking a snow-covered courtyard. A great oak tree dominated the center. It had been preserved magically with a fae glamour that turned it so white it resembled stone. Four young trees full of vibrant green leaves defied the winter weather, growing around it.

"I love the snow," Tomorrow said, nibbling on a corner of bundt cake. "The immortal trees keep it so warm up north we never get any, but it's captivating, isn't it? It makes everything it touches even more beautiful."

"Do you want to walk outside and enjoy it?" Dark finished his plate of fruit and assorted cheeses and handed it off to a server.

Tomorrow shivered at the thought. "The Seelie aren't made for the cold."

"What if I promise to keep you close?" Dark's grin went crooked, and her heart stuttered.

How could anyone say no to a sly smile like that?

They donned their coats and walked the courtyard. The sun had risen above the trees flanking the manor, setting the clouds aflame in the sky. Her nose was half-frozen, but tucked as she was against Dark's dragon heat, it wasn't unpleasant.

Tomorrow stuck out her tongue and caught a falling flake on the tip of it. Dark chortled at her. He held her so close she felt the vibration of his joy against her side. His warmth seeped under her skin, chasing off the chill.

They had an audience on the balcony above. Tomorrow felt her cousin's malicious eyes before she caught him scowling at her.

"It occurs to me," Dark grumbled, "that all your problems might be solved if I simply murdered your foul cousin."

"If only," Tomorrow rasped. "Alas, I'm Seelie, and I'm no rat."

Only a rat would harm a family member. There was no greater dishonor amongst her kind than that. Glen and the rest of the Freest clan were rats. She would not be like them. She would happily see him carted off to a prison cell, however. That was no less than what he and the rest of his clan deserved.

"*You* wouldn't be killing him, mind you," he said playfully. "I could just change into my dragon form like I changed into my formal wear this morning, pluck him off that balcony, and gobble him whole right now."

She laid a hand on his chest earnestly. "You can't," she insisted. "First, I'd still bear the burden of the dishonor since you're only in this mess because of me, and there are loads of other Freests. They really are like rats. I don't think even you could eat all of them. Besides, you'd get into trouble, wouldn't you? I'd like to see Glen in irons, not you."

Dark shrugged. "Maybe a little trouble. The Lunar queen is fond of my sister, so it's hard to say. It'd be worth it either way, I think."

The fae man called Jonas stepped out onto the balcony. He shared a gruff word with Glen that Tomorrow couldn't make out, though it pleased her to see her cousin affronted once more. In a temper, Glen stormed back inside. Appearing amused with himself, Jonas leaned over the stone rim, watching as his wife and daughter entered through the gates to explore the courtyard below. String music floated out from the ballroom, carried softly on the air. A dragon song.

"Ah, I know this one," the duke said, dark gaze shining in the new morning light. "We have to dance to this one."

Tomorrow bit her bottom lip. "Oh, but . . ."

"I've got you," he reminded her, holding her not just with his arms—his steaming tail came up to hug her hip. It was pleasantly warm, like a hot water bottle.

She smiled down at it. "If we see any more unsavory sorts like Glen, I think we should—"

"Come and dance with me," he said, his voice so penetratingly rich she wanted to bask in it. "If anyone else so much as looks at you cross, I'll rip their

head off and breathe fire down their throat. How does that sound?”

Tomorrow stared at him, jaw slack. Then her lips closed with a pop. “Actually, that sounds lovely. Thank you.”

On the lawn, at the crest of a small hill where the snow was thinner, Dark led her through the steps of the Unseelie dance. He held her close, warming her front, and when her feet felt leaden and didn’t move quickly enough, he lifted her, floating her into the next turn as though she were weightless.

He spun her again, and Tomorrow laughed until she was breathless, her heart fluttering like the wings of a hummingbird within the cage of her ribs. His hand at her back hovered low on her spine. The attentive touch reminded her of the kiss they’d shared. It had been for show, of course, but gods above and below, pressing her lips to his had felt like a spiritual event, like an awakening in her soul. He’d kissed her so enthusiastically, so convincingly, she’d forgotten for a moment that they were play-acting.

Guests gathered around the gates, chatting amicably. The fae woman with the pink skin walked her mortal daughter around the enchanting courtyard as the music changed.

“I don’t know this song,” Dark confessed.

“That’s all right,” Tomorrow breathed. Being able to dance again at all was a brilliant revelation. She nearly felt like her old self. “I know this one,” she said.

Tomorrow wasn’t done with him yet. She kept her hand clasped in his and took the lead, not caring if she got the timing wrong. Dark was terrible at following but very good-humored about it. She slowed their pace to fit the new soulful tune. At this speed, she could find her wind and even speak to him.

“Thank you for this,” she said softly, her breath puffing out between them, casting up a small cloud. Her feet were still heavy, but she didn’t *feel* clumsy in his arms. She didn’t feel like an imposter at his side. She belonged here . . . maybe not in this royal manor, but *here*, in her pretty dress, dancing with the dragon duke she was coming to respect deeply.

He stopped her then, just for a moment. His hand cupped her face, tilting it upward. His palm was dragon hot and gentle.

“You were right,” he said, trapping the drop of snow that landed on her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Snow makes everything even more beautiful.”

Tomorrow blushed so fiercely she no longer felt the cold on her face at all. Before responding, she craned her neck to confirm her suspicion. None of the guests in the courtyard were close enough to have heard him say that, not the mother and daughter and not the group by the gates.

“You need not pretend now.” She wet her lips, thinking of that kiss again. “Why are you being so sweet to me?”

His mouth quirked. “Because I’m your—”

A great howl rent the air. More wolves joined the chorus, and Tomorrow leapt from the duke, startled by the unexpected noise.

“Everything is fine,” Dark soothed. “The King of Night keeps wolves as pets. They must be feeding them.”

“Not unless we’re their food,” Tomorrow whimpered as a short, wood-paneled door opened in the stone wall.

A pack of massive Lunar beasts rushed out, filling the courtyard in a frenzy of beating paws and gnashing teeth.

Chapter 6



Dark

The wolves charged toward the fae woman and her young daughter first, and Dark's hands made fists. Huddled together under the great stone oak tree, the woman and child were the closest feast. The gaggle of guests near the gates sprinted inside the main house, screaming for help as more wolves filled the lawn.

"Not the child!" Tomorrow gathered up her skirts.

He reached for her. "Tomorrow, don't—"

But she was already running. She'd said the poison had taken her grace, but she was still surprisingly quick-footed when fueled by panic. She sped out of Dark's reach, kicking up snow, slipping momentarily in the powder before barreling through the nearest drift.

Dark was at her heels, terrified to his marrow for her. Images of razor-sharp claws and snapping wolf teeth tearing through all her soft flesh flooded his mind. The bond pounded to life in his chest, heating him from the inside out. Ash billowed from his nostrils.

She was younger than he was and mostly mortal, not likely capable of battling giant wolves. As immortals aged, their muscles hardened and thickened. It made them stronger but slower than those who had seen fewer centuries. He was slower than Tomorrow.

The fae mother grabbed up her daughter, pushing the child behind her the way Dark desperately wanted to shove himself between his delicate mate and all those wild wolves.

The beasts circled their prey.

"Look here!" Tomorrow shouted, waving her arms over her head.

The wolves hunkered down, showing their teeth, but as Tomorrow continued her racket, they turned their attention away from the mother and child and sharpened their eyes on her instead.

Tomorrow slowed. "Dark, stop," she said, her voice strong and sure.

Caught off-guard, Dark listened, halting in the snow feet away from her. "Come here," he hissed at her back.

"I'm Seelie," she reminded him calmly, spreading her hands wide for the beasts in a pacifying gesture. "Ferocious things tend to like me."

Thinking of the fairies and his own fondness for her, he could confirm her words were true, but that didn't make him any more comfortable with her getting closer to those furry monsters. The nearest wolf snarled and snapped at her.

"Oh, hush you," Tomorrow said sternly.

The wolf licked his muzzle and whined.

"Jonas!" the mother cried.

From the balcony above, the Lunar fae with brown skin and bracketed horns leapt over the stone rim. He landed hard on the ground, crashing into a snowbank. Stumbling to his feet, he recovered in a way only a full-blooded immortal could.

"Keep looking at me, you silly beasts," Tomorrow clapped her hands together as father joined mother and child beneath the white tree.

Tomorrow walked backward in the direction of the small door that had opened in the side of the wall, and the wolves gathered closer, curious about the strange woman who'd charged at them so brashly.

Dark attempted to move with her.

"Stay right where you are," Tomorrow scolded. "You're too threatening, Dark. You'll only antagonize them."

The duke's tail sliced at the air, then thumped irritably against the snow, but he trusted her and the Seelie affinity with nature. He kept his feet planted. Jonas hoisted the little girl over his shoulder. He took his wife's hand, and carefully they slipped away from the trees, creeping toward the gates.

"Wait," the little girl begged. Her feet pedaled under her green dress. "I wasn't done looking at them!"

“Not right now, darling,” the mother said gently, and the family hurried out of the courtyard.

A wolf snapped its jaws at Dark. Dark resisted the urge to snap his sharp teeth back.

“Quiet, you brute,” Tomorrow said affectionately, and the wolf padded toward her, head low in capitulation. She made a fist and held it out for the creature to sniff. The wolf nosed her knuckles. Tension continued to course through the muscles in Dark’s back and shoulders. He was ready to spring. His tail coiled and uncoiled beside him, wanting to reach for her.

The bulky mage guard, Arne, charged out of the gates, another guard in tow. Wolves yipped and growled. The mages made crescent symbols with their hands, cupping their fingers.

“Sleep,” the mages called, chanting the word repeatedly. Moon magic scented the air with incense. The spell would have worked more quickly if the sun hadn’t been overhead, dulling their connection to the Divine Night.

The wolves whined and whimpered. One by one, they fell to the snow, sound asleep.

All the pent-up aggression surging through the duke came to the surface then. His horns and tail steamed in big billowy clouds as he turned on the guards. “What in the blazing stars happened?”

“We don’t know, Your Grace.” Arne said. “But I assure you, whoever opened that door, it wasn’t anyone on staff. The wolves should be sleeping this time of day. None of us were anywhere near there.”

“Glen,” Tomorrow hissed low for the duke’s ears only.

Chest heaving, Dark stared at her. He wanted to scoop her up and tuck her into the safety of his hoard, watching her charge at hungry wolves had unnerved him so.

“Please don’t ever do that again,” he said, his voice gravel.

“Aw.” Tomorrow simpered. “Were you so worried about me? What a giant softy you are. I’m just fine, you know. I told you, ferocious things like me.”

“I know that. I *am* a ferocious thing. But I prefer you just the way you are, with all your fingers and toes still attached. Don’t do that to me again,” he added more sternly. Unable to help himself, he gathered her against his side. His tail tightened around her, hugging her middle.

Tomorrow sniggered.

They returned to the ballroom and found their table. Dark was too anxious to sit, tail curling and uncurling at his back. He helped Tomorrow into her chair while she explained in a hushed voice for Margot and Susan all that had transpired outside.

"It was him, I tell you," Tomorrow said. Her eyes scanned the crowd, searching for her cousin.

"You think Glen cut loose those wolves in the courtyard?" Susan asked. "But he was over there, seated across from the Earl, arguing with the executor when all the screaming started."

"I was trying to read their lips," Margot added, "so I could tell you what they were having a row about. Turns out, I'm not any good at that. They said your name an awful lot, though. That was the only word I could make out. Sorry, love."

Tomorrow gazed up at the duke, her eyes big and pleading. "It was him, Dark. He was hoping they'd gobble me up or terrify me further or both. Perhaps he had one of his men release the wolves while he was arguing with the Earl, or he could have sent some other Freest, but it was him. He's responsible."

"I believe you," he said.

"I'm telling you— Oh? You believe me?" Her white brows pinched together. Then her copper eyes went big and glassy. "Just like that?"

"Just. Like. That." He wanted to reach out and touch her. He'd touched her several times that morning, but this urge felt like something more. His hands hung heavy and inert at his sides, confused by the pull of instincts and the typhoon of feeling churning in his gut.

Susan gave her arm a friendly pat. "We all believe you, love."

"My offer to eat him still stands," Dark said.

* * *

They ate a quick meal. Dark wasn't interested in waiting out the rest of the feast. He took Tomorrow down a short hallway, toward the small library not far from the entrance. When he'd met with the queen, he'd spotted a closet there he planned to make use of.

“Oi,” a male voice called down the hall.

Still anxious from the wolves, Dark instinctively tugged Tomorrow behind him, but the intruder was just the father from earlier, Jonas.

The fae with the bracketed horns jogged up to them, one hand fishing in his breast pocket. “I wanted to thank you both,” he said somberly. “You protected my daughter and my wife from those beasts, and for that I’m in your debt.” He pulled out a card and handed it to the duke.

Dark looked it over. Tomorrow peeked around him. Beneath the name Lord Jonas Moen was the title “Bargainer” in elegant script, alongside two addresses. The first was for a business tower not far from the river Eventide, and the second was a pawn shop on Dimmet Street.

“I know of the Bargainer,” Dark said, cautiously accepting the card.

“No doubt you’ve heard terrible things. They’re probably all true,” Jonas said dryly. “Either way, a favor from me is worth a great deal in River Row. Look me up, and I’ll be of service to you both.” He bowed to Tomorrow, adding earnestly, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Tomorrow blushed scarlet, and Dark wondered if that was the first time anyone had ever used an honorific for her. Jonas dipped his chin in acknowledgement of the duke, then he left the way he’d come.

Dark waited until the Lunar fae was gone before checking to make sure no staff members were inside the closet. He turned the doorknob until it clicked, twice then thrice.

A thought occurred to him before he pulled it open once more. It was instinct that had him eager to get her inside his hoard again. He should tread more carefully with such things.

“I need you to do something for me,” he told her, voice full of warning.

Tomorrow shuffled closer. There were tired smudges under her eyes. White hair had loosened from its pins during the ruckus in the courtyard. “What d’you need?”

“While inside my hoard, bear in mind that dragons like to keep things that are rare and valuable. When something like that walks in so willingly, it can be difficult to let it back out again.”

Tomorrow blinked at him. “Um. I’ll keep that in mind, I guess?”

“Don’t be precious and adorable in there,” he said firmly.

The line between her brows smoothed. She beamed at him. "Aw, are you saying you might want to hoard me?"

He glared at her. "Don't coo like that. I'm being serious here. Making adorable noises at me isn't helping. And you should definitely smile less."

Tomorrow scrunched up her face, concentrating hard. Her lips pursed.

"What do you think you're doing?" he grumbled.

"Trying not to be precious," she mumbled.

Dark shoved open the door. It creaked as it swung wide. "Gods save you, I don't think you can help it. Enter at your own risk, you ridiculously adorable little woman."

To her own detriment, Tomorrow shot him another sunshine smile and trotted inside his hoard. Her mate pull remained faint, but it and something else, something distinctive and surprising, fluttered to life in his chest. He wondered if she felt it at all. He'd been about to find out when the wolves had interrupted them.

She jogged into his meadow, hands spread wide, allowing the tall grass to brush the tips of her fingers. Then she spotted the fairies, and she lifted her skirts above her ankles, rushing to greet them.

Dark wanted to call her mate, but he needed the timing to be just right. It had seemed like the perfect moment before, dancing under the glow of the morning sun, snow glittering in her hair.

Surely, she'd felt something then, too. But what if she couldn't because so much of her was mortal? Dark groaned to himself. What if these blooming feelings were entirely his alone?

How exactly did mortals feel connection and attraction, since they didn't have magical instincts or bonds that could grow into a true mate attachment that linked their souls for life?

As though seeing the fairies rejuvenated her, Tomorrow rolled in the grass with the girls, gently squashing Ruby beneath her. The ginger fairy found that great fun and begged her to do it again, chittering excitedly and reaching for her with tiny, clawed hands.

The sight made his heart lurch. Tomorrow was everything a dragon wasn't. Soft and sweet instead of hard as stone. Silly instead of serious. Tender instead of vicious.

He wanted all of her.

“Bebebebebe,” Bebe said, sailing toward Dark as he stalked closer, responding to the pull of his desires. The silver-haired fairy alighted on his shoulder.

“Hello there,” he greeted her, and she kissed his cheek, the peck like a drop of warm dew on the edge of his jaw.

A giant tortoise lumbered out from the shrubbery edging the lagoon beneath the waterfall. Three adult fairies rode on its back. Except for Ruby, the girls flew off to help gather flowers to feed the turtle they called Pots.

Tomorrow lay on her back in the grass, gazing up at the purple sky. Ruby gazed with her, stretched out along her belly, her arms folded behind her head. She chattered at Tomorrow absently.

“Are you talking about the stars?” Tomorrow guessed. The little lights were faint in the sky.

At Dark’s insistence, the clouds rolled away and the sky darkened until stars shone brightly.

“Oooooooooo,” Ruby said. Ruby had always liked astronomy. She hovered about Dark and his telescope when he did his charting to add more creations to his magical sky, and she listened the most attentively when he told the girls stories about how the star signs got their names.

“That one looks like the Night Mother’s horse, Slepnir,” Tomorrow said, pointing to the central-most grouping. Slepnir’s head was shaped like a triangle, its body rounded and its tail a long string of lights.

“You know your stars,” Dark said, sitting down beside her. He wanted to trap her hand in his, link their fingers. Instead, he picked at the grass that poked his trousers.

“Only the more popular ones. You seem to really love them,” she said, gesturing at his tower. “I saw all your charts inside there. Where’d you pick up the fascination?”

Dark ripped free a blade of grass that wasn’t really grass, just another of his creations, and he tore it down the middle. “Dragons don’t believe they get an afterlife, or at least, it’s not the same one that other beings with souls get. Full-blooded dragons eventually become one with the mountains, neither alive nor dead.”

“That sounds . . .”

“Tedious,” he offered. He ripped the blade into a third piece and began to braid the strands together.

She chuckled. “Yes. A bit.”

“The fae believe they go on to walk the stars with the Divine Night. My mother was not a dragon. She was fae. A trickster and a Lunar diplomat before her death.” He peered up at the canopies of glowing lights. “I believe she’s walking those stars now. That and every loss I’ve had thereafter has only increased my interest in them.”

Before he finished the grassy plait, Ruby came and snatched it from his fingers, winding it around her neck like jewelry, as he knew she would. She chirruped at him happily before lying back down on Tomorrow’s stomach.

Dark continued, “I don’t know much of my mother, but I think she would choose to walk with Slepnir there. I’ve been told she liked horses.”

“That’s lovely, Dark.” Tomorrow laid her gloved hand on his knee, and she gave it an affectionate squeeze, a squeeze he felt simultaneously around his heart. “I’m certain you’re right about those stars.”

“We have a lot in common, you and I,” he said, wondering if he was being too obvious with his attempts to hint at connection. He’d had experience trying to seduce a person physically, but no experience using his feelings like some . . . well, some mortal. “My mother wasn’t married to my father either, you see.”

If Tomorrow suspected him, she didn’t let on. “Ah. We’re an illegitimate pair, both with a duchy hanging over us.” She smirked at him. “Is it a lot, tending to a duchy? It sounds tedious—though not as tedious as becoming a mountain of rocks.”

His breathy laugh was short-lived. “It’s significantly less tedious once everyone in the duchy is dead.”

“The first war,” Tomorrow groaned. “I heard a few things about Mount Rasika being caught up, but . . . I shouldn’t have brought it up at all.”

“It’s not your fault. No, that blame lies with my tyrant father.” And with himself, he thought glumly. When it came to protecting the land he’d been given, he’d made all the wrong choices. Death and trouble clung to him, and the vulnerable people who depended on him had been caught in the crossfire.

Dark ripped free another piece of magically-made grass and began to knot it briskly. Ruby took it before he finished, tying it in her hair.

“Beautiful,” Tomorrow told her with a lightness that warmed Dark’s chest.

Ruby gave her gloved finger a quick love bite before she flew off to show the other fairies and the tortoise Pots her new prizes.

Tomorrow gazed around, taking in the meadow. “What’s your favorite treasure in your hoard?” she asked. Then her smile went sly. “Wait! Don’t tell me. I want to guess at it.”

She picked herself up out of the grass, wobbled, and fell onto her backside with a snorted giggle that made Dark’s heart feel like it’d grown two sizes too big. He laughed at her.

Squashing a pile of grass, she rolled haphazardly onto her side. “My legs are a bit tired. I haven’t run like I did this morning in ages.”

Dark helped her rise. He braced her hips and boosted her back with his tail.

“Very useful, that tail.” She was grinning again in that way he’d warned her against.

His stomach tightened pleasantly.

“Hm,” she hummed, steadying herself. She tested her weight with a tentative step. Then another. “I would guess your fairy girls are your most favorite, but you mentioned rarity being very important to dragons and you have so many of them . . .”

“That’s correct,” he said, following at her heels, ready to catch her if she fell again.

She went for the astronomy tower first. Tomorrow opened the door and wandered inside. Dark didn’t let people inside his hoard. On the rarest of occasions when he allowed a family member like his sister to visit, they didn’t ever touch or explore any of his things. It didn’t bother him at all when Tomorrow did that very same thing, though. In fact, he enjoyed it.

Her eyes lit in the most charming of ways as she pulled open drawers and lifted the lids on chests, finding gems and coins and various assets inside. Committed to her objective, she headed up the winding stairs.

The top of the tower was furnished with an oversized bed made from solid mahogany. The heavy curtains that hung at its sides had been hemmed by a famous Unseelie seamstress, the velvet woven from the finest silks.

Tomorrow's breath caught when she spotted his golden telescope set up near a large open window trimmed in similar velvet drapes. "Can't be," she said in awe. "That's not solid gold."

"Most of it is." He tucked his hands in his pockets, doing his best impression of demure.

Tomorrow padded across the stone floor, reached for the telescope, then seemed to think better of it. Lower lip trapped between her teeth, she pulled her hand back sheepishly. "And what's under there?"

She pointed at the potted tree in the corner. The pot was made of terracotta with scales painted on it. He had the tree covered in canvas. That particular plant flourished best in the shade and needed warmth. Eager for her reaction, he pulled back the covering.

Tomorrow's jaw dropped and her hand went over her mouth in the most gratifying way. Mirth rumbled out of him.

"Dark . . . are those . . . ? No."

"Yes."

"They can't be," she whispered.

"They are."

Diamonds? She mouthed the word.

The Hell tree was covered in diamonds. They grew on its spindly branches like little droplets of crystalline water. When the light hit the stones, they made the tree look like it was on fire. The topmost limbs came up to his shoulders now. It had grown a lot that year.

"Diamonds," he repeated. "You can touch it. Just don't pick one. Once picked, the tree stops growing and won't produce more. It'd be a shame not to see how large it gets or how many gems it can make."

Tomorrow's hands went into the air in surrender. "I can't touch them. It would be a crime to get a single smudge on either of these precious things."

Her brows pinched together. She glanced down at his worn boots which needed replacing. He had a finer set in a chest at the bottom of the tower, but he neglected to wear them in public.

"If you have all this," she wondered, "why do you stay at The Boot? Why don't you own a proper house full of guards and massive copper bathtubs and

seven sitting rooms and acres and acres of fruit trees and servants to tend to your every whim? I'd have at least that if I could."

Dark scratched a hand through his hair, flattening errant strands around his scaled horns. "Treasure is for hoarding, not for spending."

"But all of it?" her voice pitched high. "I approached you because your boots were worn and your jacket was faded and I thought you might be as down on your luck as I am, but just look at all this." She gestured broadly at the wealth around the room.

He shrugged. "I learned long ago that if you want to avoid the attention of wicked, powerful men, then it's best not to flaunt what you have that's worth taking."

She looked at him with sad, sympathetic eyes, then her gaze narrowed. "Dark, if you were never actually destitute, why'd you agree to help me?"

"Because I wanted to finally get right something that I've often gotten very wrong in the past," he said. His chin dropped. "I wanted to help you. Needed to. And now I owe your cousin a dagger in his leg."

"What'd you get wrong?" She shifted closer to him and laid a hand on his arm.

He felt her touch in his heart. The dim pull of connection sharpened between them. It pulsed and skipped. He ran his fingers through his hair again, this time mussing what he'd fixed before. "I made a lot of choices during the first war that I wish had been different. Lives I should have saved and couldn't."

Those were words he'd never spoken aloud to anyone, but with that connection pumping through him, he felt like he could tell her anything.

No, that wasn't all of it. It was her sweetness too. She was so kind he could tell her anything.

Her hand on his arm skated across his chest, and his heart jumped. She planted her palm on his breast and stared up at him with such earnest affection, he felt pulled apart by it, penetrated and seen until he was held together by the worn seams of his aged formal wear. At any moment, one of those seams could pop.

"You seem so very sad now, Dark," she whispered. "I don't like it at all. I want to squeeze it right out of you." A line deepened between her brows. "Do you think you need some sort of redemption after all that?"

Dark fidgeted under her probing stare. “I *know* I do,” he confessed.

“Look at me, Dark,” she said sternly, and his gaze snapped to hers. “That’s absolute rubbish. I won’t claim that I’m some historical expert by any means, but even the Seelie who would love nothing more than to be unfair toward your kind holds *you* and your queen responsible for finally bringing an end to that dreadful first war.”

His next breath tasted like ash. “I’m the Duke of the Dead, Tomorrow. My home is a tombstone.”

“I *exist*,” she said, fierceness burning in her sunrise eyes. “I exist and have a home because you stopped your father.”

“I betrayed my own kind when I sent my warriors intentionally late to that final battle at Bloodmire and—”

The hand on his breast knotted into a fist, twisting his shirt. “*And* you saved an entire race of people from annihilation by a tyrant.”

His teeth came together. A muscle ticked in his jaw, bitter grief freeing an old anger he’d buried deep where he’d hoped to never find it again. “In retribution, my father slaughtered everyone I’d ever loved. He used his wicked magic to turn me into a runt and held me captive in his hoard to keep my powerful sister in line for centuries.”

Horror rounded her eyes, and her hand fell from his chest. That pull of connection dulled between them. He worked his throat, unable to think of anything to salvage the moment. The silence deepened until the rush of blood in his ears was all he could hear.

He’d ruined her fun, stolen a drop of her sunlight. Dark wanted to go back to their game and put the terrors of the past behind them. “Tomorrow, try to guess —”

She threw her arms around him, squeezing his middle with a strength her frail body shouldn’t have possessed, squeezing the air from his lungs. Connection burned through him, as hot and sure as dragon fire. Surrounded by her sweetness, her scent of almonds and citrus banished the ash from his nostrils.

“You wish you could change things,” she said into his shirt, her cheek pressed against his waistcoat. “We always wish we could change terrible things, but it’s not our fault that we don’t have the foresight to manage it. Only the divines have that. So why not blame them and be done with it?”

Dark maneuvered an arm out from her embrace. He held it over her head, uncertain what to do with it. A part of him wished to grip her tight, embrace the tenderness she offered and never let her go. But his eyes welled, and his throat was hot enough to burn, and he couldn't think of the right words to express what it meant to have someone find no fault in him over the things that haunted him most. How did a person as kind as Tomorrow look upon him, know what he'd done, and not see a terrible monster?

He laid a hand in her hair. Briefly, he knotted his fingers in the strands before he simply let them rest there, molding to the curve of her scalp. He let her hold him, basking in her sunlight.

"Tomorrow," he said, after the rock finally left his throat, "you were trying to guess which treasure is my favorite."

She let him go. He immediately felt the loss of her, and his throat stung.

Tomorrow considered both of his treasures, tapping her chin, her head on a swivel between the gilded telescope and the diamond tree. "I'm so tempted to guess your telescope is your favorite because you love stars so much. But . . ." She rubbed at her pursed lips. "Tell me more about this incredible tree."

"They're extraordinarily rare," he offered, folding his arms over his middle to replace the lost pressure of her body. It had been a while since he'd taken the time to enjoy either treasure. "Hell trees flourish in heat. They're grown by blood magic users south of the Hell Mountains, not far from Rasika and the great lake of fire. Demons use them as bait to lure unsuspecting mortals. Then they feed on the treasure hunters, syphoning their life force."

"Fascinating." Tomorrow chewed on her cheek, struggling to come to a conclusion. After a moment, she spun to face him fully. "I've decided."

She was smiling at him again, dammit. Tomorrow was honey incarnate, sweet as Rasika berry pie, as brilliant as fucking star fire.

He knew in that moment that her guess would be wrong. Perhaps before she'd come inside, she could select one of those two things at the top of his beloved tower and she'd have been right that they were his favorite, his most treasured item. But not anymore. Right now, his favorite treasure in his hoard was her.

And he almost told her so.

She pointed at the telescope. "I pick—"

Dark scooped her off her feet, into his arms, cutting her short.

“Oof. What are you doing?” Her legs kicked at the air in an endearing flurry of pale skin and satiny skirts.

Dark hugged her to his chest, his tail flicking at his back in an agitated fashion. Instinct turned his insides molten, and blood thundered in his ears.

“I’m getting you out of here,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded, as he rushed her down the stairs. And then realization dawned, and her expression smoothed. She threaded her slender arms around his neck, bracing against him. “Ah, are you trying to get me out of here before you have to hoard me?”

“Stop talking,” he grumped.

Tomorrow snorted. “We both know I’m not capable of that.”

Dark twisted the knob, kicked open the door, and rushed her out of his hoard.

Chapter 7



Dark

The duke's next morning was spent at a small nocturnal dinner party with the upper echelon of Lunar society. The Earl of Westarow had not attended, despite being on the guest list, so Dark and Tomorrow did not stay long.

That afternoon, they took in a music performance together at the theatre, appearing in public as a couple. By the next day, they'd made it into the local scandal sheets, though the column had less to do with them and more to do with human commentary on the barbaric practices of immortals courting without proper chaperones.

The following afternoon, Dark watched with building concern as Tomorrow napped the day away in his chair by the stove. Their busy days together had worn on her heavily, putting a furrow between her brows even in her slumber. She'd eaten a small lunch but had declined to join him for dinner.

She finally roused later while he readied himself for sleep.

"You're welcome to share my bed again if you need to," he told her, his words measured as he unbuttoned his waistcoat. She'd slept in the chair the evening before and had tossed and turned restlessly for most of the night.

"I'm fine," she said, pulling the bear fur blanket up over her shoulders, looking small and frail in the big wingback. "And I don't want to be a bother."

"Suit yourself," he said, stripping down to his under-linens before making himself comfortable. He'd remembered to leave a few candles lit and had strategically placed them closer to her chair.

As the call of sleep grew more forceful and he was moments from slipping under, he felt movement in the bedding at his side.

Tomorrow scooted beneath the covers, pulling his great scaled tail around her waist.

His amusement shook the mattress.

"Hush," she said fondly, and side by side, they fell fast asleep together.

Dark awoke the next morning well-rested, remembering none of his dreams. He rubbed sleep out of his eyes before studying the woman in his bed blurry-eyed. She'd shed a few hairs on her pillow. He picked the little tufts off the cushion and squinted at them. It was possible that fae lost more hair than dragons, but the sight of those frail, powder-white strands made him worry that the stress of their scheme was deteriorating her already weakened body.

A small knock came at the door.

"Come in," he called, once again expecting a maid.

Susan pushed inside, hefting two coal pails, her fair-hair bound up beneath a lace bonnet. "Morning."

Dark chortled. "Now, I know *you* don't do maid's work on the regular. What're you doing here?"

"Caught me." She gazed over at Tomorrow and her face fell. "I was worried about our girl and wanted to check on her. She napped through dinner last night."

Dark exhaled through his nose, rubbing the fallen strands between his fingers. "You took the thoughts right out of my mind."

"How long are you going to let her sleep?"

"As long as she needs." He watched Tomorrow nuzzle into her pillow, tension tightening his chest.

"We've found a magistrate for you two." Susan bunched up her apron and petticoats, protecting her sensitive mortal hands with the layers of fabric before pulling open the ash door on the stove. "Actually, it was Margot's clever doing. She used all her best moves on a regular who works at the House of Judges. She learned that a Magistrate Balder will sign just about anything for the right price. We can get you an engagement agreement without all the waiting and hassle caused by the two of you not being of this province. With enough coin, we won't even need a solicitor. Sooner you have that, the sooner we get this mess behind our girl and she can finally heal up properly."

“That’s good work. Thank Margot for me,” he said without taking his eyes off Tomorrow. Her lips were parted in her slumber. They were dry and chapped.

“Get Tomorrow up and downstairs in time for lunch, and then you can both thank Margot and her glorious tits.” Susan changed out the coal in the stove and quit the room.

* * *

Dark and Tomorrow ate an early lunch in the parlor of the Gilded Boot, seated across from Margot. They chose the far table with banquette seating along the wall, surrounded by potted plants. It was the table the courtesans used for their more reserved clients.

Talking about bribing a magistrate certainly called for more privacy.

Activity was beginning to pick up at the brothel, though only a few of the courtesans were currently working. Dark was glad to see Tomorrow eating well. She seemed more herself again. She sipped at her bowl of soup while Margot discussed her plan.

“Balder doesn’t like the Unseelie, rumor has it,” Margot warned. “And I’ve seen how immortals are about telling lies. Fae aren’t any good at it, especially when the questions are direct. Goes against your culture and all that.” She sat sideways in her chair, one leg crossed over the other under voluminous skirts. “I think I should go at this one alone.”

Dark’s brow furrowed. “Won’t you need our signatures?”

“If we up the price, I wager he’ll give me a signed document and let you put your names on later. I plan to tell him one of our courtesans is making faces with a regular and we need a quick and quiet fix before the babe is born. If all you’ve got is old wyvern coins, Susie and I can make a trade with you for gold crescents.”

Tomorrow set her spoon down midbite. “I’ll pay you back,” she said sheepishly.

“Of course,” Dark said, though he had absolutely no intention of taking any coin from her. He picked her spoon up and placed it back in her hand. The food was doing her good. “Tuck in, Sunshine.”

He fished out his purse, which he'd filled to bursting that morning after Susan's visit. Tomorrow's copper eyes went as round as her soup bowl when he opened the small leather fastening and fished out a handful of the old wyvern coins.

"That's more than enough," Margot said, tucking the coins down the front of her dress for safekeeping. "I'll take care of the rest."

"Thank you!" Tomorrow shot at her as an afterthought.

Margot responded with a mischievous wink, then shuffled off, catching a friendly pat on her generous ass from a patron on her way out of the parlor.

Tomorrow's curious gaze bounced from the bursting purse to his boots which were worn and in need of replacing. They settled next on the faded blue trim of his jacket. "Couldn't you at least buy yourself the comfort of good boots? You could have the best of everything with even a portion of what I've seen in your hoard. I don't mean to judge you," she added hurriedly. "Just curious why you won't indulge at least a little."

She'd abandoned her spoon again. He picked it up and handed it to her. "Keep eating and I'll tell you." He waited until she'd filled her mouth before continuing. "I wasted too many years of my life constantly battling to protect what was mine. I'm done with all that. And certain treasures aren't meant to be spent, even if I was down on my luck. I'd never sell my favorite ones."

She smacked him with one of her sparkling smiles. "Certain treasures that you hoard away from the world like a miserly hermit. What good is all that if you never pamper yourself?"

"Now, that sounded like judgement," he said, his tone teasing. "Listen here, Sunshine, I won't frown at you for insisting on following Seelie ways that won't let me just kill a man that deserves it ten times over. Don't you now judge me for being a dragon about my treasure. While we're on that subject, Glen Freest will be getting a dagger in his thigh long before I'm through with him, and I don't care what you or your Seelie tree-lovers have to say about that."

Laughter pinkened her cheeks. "A dagger in his thigh seems more than fair at this point. Just keep him breathing, please. There needs to be something left to stuff in a jail cell."

"What are we going to do today?" he asked as more patrons crowded the parlor. The room began to smell of homey woodsmoke and hops.

“We should probably be seen doing more romantic things, huh?” She chewed at her lower lip. “Things a courting pair would do.”

Dark took her hand in his and laced their fingers together. “We don’t have to go anywhere to do that,” he said, voice low in her ear. It occurred to him as her fingers warmed between his that although he didn’t have a great deal of experience making connections emotionally with a mate, especially without the help of magical instincts, physical seduction would be as straightforward as breathing.

And incredibly fun.

* * *

Tomorrow

Tomorrow’s mind stopped working as Dark ran his thumb repeatedly over the back of her hand. As he regaled her with stories of the constellations, answering every single rambling question that popped into her head with patient attention, she had to remind herself twice that their relationship was a farce.

With the pad of his finger, he drew an invisible line between the freckles on the back of her hand, a star sign she didn’t recognize.

“Iden’s constellation is popular amongst romantics, but I’ve never understood the interest,” he said, his voice low and liquid. He’d pulled her so close his dragon heat was pleasantly balmy against her shoulder and side. His tail flicked playfully along the hem of her skirt. The motion made her stomach swoop.

Tomorrow had never felt so overwhelmingly distracted by the presence of another person. She forgot for a moment what they were even talking about.

“Stars,” she stuttered, then she shook her head to clear it. “Er, I mean, I don’t recall Iden’s story or her stars.”

The rough pad of his finger continued to stroke over the back of her hand, first the diamond shape for the goddess’s head, the curve of her horns, the length of her arms, then the wide bell shape that formed her dress.

“Her lover was a dragon.” His hard accent curled around her like smoke. “Like most dragons, he wished to possess the greatest treasure ever made. The

treasure changes depending on who tells the story. Amongst the Lunar Court, it's a book of rare spells; to the Seelie, it's the powerful potion that promised multiple offspring; and in the mountains, it's a monarch's crown. To win the dragon's heart, Iden traded her hands to a shadow god and was given this treasure."

"That's quite the sacrifice," Tomorrow said, her lungs feeling full and her breaths turning shallow.

"I value precious things as much as any dragon, but a good lover can do so much with their hands," he said as his thumb swept over each of her knuckles. "A lover with clever hands—that's the real treasure."

An image of his fingers put to good use sent a web of shivers down Tomorrow's back. She met his eyes, and all thoughts of the gods and stars fled from her. His dark orbs were as smooth and reflective as volcanic glass. She could swim in those soulful eyes.

Overwhelmed though her senses were, she didn't pull away. His lips were coming closer to hers, and the lines of pretend and reality felt entirely blurred. Like an invisible tether connected the two of them, dragging him nearer.

"Is this for our audience?" she whispered.

"No," he breathed. "This is for me."

Then he kissed her.

His touches were always dragon hot, but this one was blissfully tender. He teased her bottom lip, and then his tongue stroked inside her mouth. She laid a hand on his chest and opened to him. She felt his tail winding loosely around her ankle, then up under the hem of her dress to graze her calf. It stole her focus. It was such an intimate part of him, a piece that she had grown so comfortable with in his bed. She wanted it to move up higher, willing it closer to the cradle of her thighs—a nighttime fantasy she returned to when it held her under the covers they shared.

He cupped her cheek. Then her throat. His thumbs traced the slopes of her breasts over her neckline, a temptation. He kissed a path down her jaw, burying his face in her neck. Wicked fingers swept across her tightening nipples over her bodice, and she felt a corresponding tug of pleasure behind her navel.

A lover with talented hands was indeed the best sort of treasure.

When she pulled back, she tried to peek around him at the parlor beyond.

“Don’t worry about them. They can’t see you here.” His touch skittered down her thigh, stopping to circle her knee, and her legs tremored. “I want to touch you—not for an audience. For you. Because I want to make you feel good.”

Tomorrow swallowed. “I—I don’t know how to say no to that.”

She didn’t *want* to say no. She wanted his touch all over her. Need had her pressing her thighs together and inching closer to him on the banquette seat. Her pulse surged in her neck and between her legs, a restless thud that demanded all of his attention. But—

“Then don’t say no,” he said, voice husky and sure.

But! But there were things she’d kept to herself. Things that haunted her now and made this whole situation feel so out of balance.

“Dark, we shouldn’t. We haven’t known each other very long at all, if you think about it. I haven’t been entirely forthcoming.”

“I know who you are.” His attentive tail traveled higher up her leg like it read her longing. Uncertain, she retreated the smallest bit.

But then his tail pulled back, and she couldn’t stand it. The loss of heat made her heart drop. She shifted in closer.

Dark’s clever hands grew more brazen, palming her breasts and dropping deep kisses down the column of her throat. He encircled her with his arms, dragging her nearer still.

“I know you,” he insisted.

Her heart soared. This beautiful dragon man knew her because he *believed* her. Believed her at her word. Just. Like. That. Believed her in a way so few had ever bothered to. Tomorrow had taken her plight to every authority: to constables, inspectors, magistrates, to politicians and lords. She’d even written letters to court royals, and none of them could help protect her. Many hadn’t even tried.

It meant so much to her that he would, that he cared, that he tried. Thanks to him, she’d get her revenge finally.

“Do you *want* me to touch you more?” he asked, his breath warming her throat.

“Yes,” she gasped, eyes rolling back in her head. “It’s the *should* you touch me more that I can’t seem to get my mind around . . .”

“I should,” he insisted.

“Oh, but—”

His lips reclaimed hers, and she leaned into his embrace. Her fingers, which should have been pushing him away, fisted in his waistcoat, dragging him closer. He kissed her until words like ‘wait’ and ‘but’ were far from her vocabulary. Unable to resist any longer, she pushed his hand down her body, demanding more.

“Yes, there,” she murmured as his touch moved below her navel to cup the top of her sex.

“Spread your thighs for me, Sunshine.” Before his command was finished, her knees were open to him under the table.

She gathered her dress in her lap, still trying to peer around him. She could see the edges of the potted plant beyond his broad frame and could hear the parlor filling with people.

Her cheeks burned. “It feels so . . .”

“Debauched?” he offered quietly.

She nodded, a corner of her lip curving upward before he claimed her mouth once more.

The scales of his tail were soft as leather. As it teased the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh, it reminded her of the padding on the wingback chair she’d grown to favor. His tail climbed up her leg to curl about her knee. His fingers worked under her dress, following her garters up the sides of her leg. He found her drawers and traced the slit in the center of the fabric so delicately she moaned.

Tomorrow buried the sound against his neck, fisting his shirt so hard she was sure she’d tear it.

Dark placed one of her hands over the cradle of her thighs. “Show me how you pleasure yourself.”

Breathless and so desperate she could hardly see straight, she found the top of her sex with her thumb and circled the bud of nerves there. Dark watched her for a time, his eyes dilated and dreamy, before he took over with tender care.

Footsteps neared, and Tomorrow shoved her skirts down over Dark’s hand. Cheeks flaming, she buried her head in his shirt, hiding herself. Tomorrow had always been slightly envious of those at The Boot who entertained themselves without worry. Since her life had changed, she’d gotten into the habit of allowing fear to rule over her. As soon as cowardice reared its ugly head, she’d

given into the compulsion, never sharing in any of the wanton fun around her, despite desperately craving the distraction.

But with Dark she felt safe and brazen.

The duke growled a warning at the intruder, the sound rumbling deep in his chest, low and threatening. It reverberated through her, and muscles in her belly pulsed. The footsteps froze. Tomorrow smiled in spite of herself. Dark sounded like a grizzly bear standing over its dinner.

The footsteps retreated quickly, and a titter bubbled out of her.

Dark smoothed back her hair soothingly until she stopped hiding herself against him, sitting upright. He resumed his exploration of her, his touch sizzling through her core. Sensation shot up her stomach and sent pleasurable tremors scampering across her skin. She moved with his caresses, hips rolling forward and back on the seat until the wood groaned. His daring tail found her wet center. The smooth tip traced it, a teasing promise she couldn't resist.

Tomorrow bucked her hips, welcoming his dragon heat inside her.

"So fierce," he purred approvingly. Then he kissed the sensitive arch of her ear, warming it with his panting breath, showering her cheek and jaw with more demanding brushes of his lips.

Her hand found the head of his hard erection, thickening against the side of his thigh. She thumbed the curved tip until it dampened the wool. His tail pulsed inside her, and he sighed, a sound so satisfying it sent her soaring.

Tomorrow felt unburdened in a way she never had before. Reckless and wild and completely wanton. The worries she'd had earlier were gone. She didn't care if anyone else came close enough to see what the table hid. Gods, he'd lit such a fire in her, she practically welcomed it.

She didn't want it to end, didn't want the fire to sizzle out, but she was circling the peak. His hand stroked her, lips teased her throat, and the end of his tail pumped inside her strong enough to rock her.

Her release hit like a freight train. If Dark hadn't been there holding her, she'd have slunk down under the table.

She hid her moan against his shoulder because that was for him, her pleasure a gift she didn't intend to share with the room. A pulse of bliss thundered inside her pelvis, rhythmically tightening intimate muscles around the tip of his tail. She rode out her release, clutching him close, feeling surrounded by him, by his

heat, his bulk, his scent thick and musky in her nose, his salty taste on her tongue.

Her next exhale was a whimper. Bleary-eyed, she blinked at him. "Should we . . . Do you want me to . . ."

"Yes." Fingers shaking, he fixed his waistcoat. Under the table, he helped her push her skirts back down her legs into some appearance of put-togetherness. Hands linked, they stood up and sped for the archway, doing a poor job of acting casually.

Tomorrow spotted Susan behind the bar. The madam shot her an all-knowing grin. Tomorrow winked at her before being whisked out of the room, across the entryway, and down a small corridor that led to the back stairs. Their rooms weren't far now, but they didn't make it inside either of them.

Tomorrow had found her courage, and she wasn't letting it go. Feeling like the basest of temptresses and loving it, she tugged him to a stop. He followed her willingly to the nook beside the stairs. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, he lifted her.

She kissed his face, his nose, his cheeks. She took her time enjoying his mouth, the taste of his dragon skin, rough and heated. Bracing her against the paneled wall of the alcove, he rucked up her skirts. Satin whisked against satin, the sound lewd to her now in a way that made her skin pebble. Between her thighs, he worked down the fall front of his trousers.

The head of his erection found the slit in her drawers. Tomorrow stiffened in his arms, fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Sunshine?" he cooed.

She laughed uneasily. "I'm fine. Really. I just . . . had a moment."

"A moment?" Cupping her ass to support her weight, he rubbed his nose against hers.

"More of a realization—" Her breath caught. Pinned between his hot chest and the wall, his fingers found the cleft of her sex and began to do wicked things in gentle circles, coaxing movements that made her startled muscles loosen.

"Do tell," he said in her ear. "I'm in no hurry. We can move slowly, and I can bury myself in you all night, or we can keep going like this."

"Let's . . . Actually, I don't know. I want both now."

"Tell me your realization, Starlight." He nuzzled her, tickling her neck with the stubble at his jaw.

"I've never seen a dragon without his clothes on," she confessed, voice wobbling with suppressed amusement. "I was nervous you might be dangerously well-endowed . . . Perhaps you grow bigger than your tail."

Dark's husky laughter reverberated through her.

"On the one hand," she continued, her nose brushing his affectionately, "you'd kill me . . . On the other, what a way to go."

They stifled their laughter to no avail. Their sniggering bounced off the paneling in the enclosure. Tomorrow hiccupped. Dark snorted. If she'd been an onlooker, she'd have thought they were both drunk, by the way they carried on.

It took great effort to pull herself together. Her eyes watered.

"Murdered by dragon cock," he said, and they fell to pieces all over again.

Dark took her hand and placed it between their bodies, over his shaft.

She fisted him, tightening her hold in increments, sliding soft skin over his hard member until his eyes slid closed and his lips parted around a jagged breath.

"Impressive. Very, very warm," she said, "but probably not deadly."

His smile slanted. "Probably not, but I'll do my best."

Tomorrow released him to rub at her brow. Their bout of laughter had gone straight to her head, making her feel dizzy. "Forgive me, but I've had a change of heart. Slow sounds lovely."

Dipping his chin, Dark touched the curve of his horns to the crown of her hair, the sign of fae deference. He held her eyes for several heartbeats before he spoke words that made the organ in her chest stop altogether:

"What you say goes, Sunshine. You can always change your mind, no forgiveness needed. You're safe with me. Understand?"

"Perfectly," she breathed. Tomorrow hugged his neck, imbuing the gesture with an immortal lifetime's worth of gratitude. She'd had other lovers before. Not all of them had been so considerate.

Dark rebuttoned his trousers and lifted her from the wall, scooping her over his shoulder. He gave her ass a playful pat that knocked a giggle out of her, then he carried her down the hall.

And into the wrong bedroom.

"Beg your pardon," Dark said hurriedly, backing out of the chamber.

Tomorrow craned her neck, catching a glimpse of a blindfolded man tied to the headboard, his naked bottom in the air. A courtesan dressed in nothing but her underthings held up a wooden paddle. “Knock next time,” she scolded.

As the door slammed shut, Tomorrow laughed uproariously.

“You’ve got me in a fog. I hardly know where I am anymore.” Dark gave her backside a firmer pat, a playful admonishment that jolted through her.

“Oh, I like that,” she said.

“Ha. You’re full of surprises, Sunshine.”

Dark hefted her into his bedroom—the correct one—and just in time. Being carried was beginning to make her lightheaded. He set her by the bed. Wobbling on her feet, she felt moisture slide down her upper lip. As Dark shut and locked the door behind her, she swiped at her nose.

“Oh dear,” Tomorrow said, blood slicking her fingers. The walls were spinning. “Dark . . .”

Her knees knocked together, and the floorboards lurched beneath her. She felt herself falling moments before everything went black.

Chapter 8



Dark

Time stopped as Tomorrow fell. Dark leapt to catch her, cushioning her head with his hands before she smacked her skull against the floorboards.

Had he done this to her?

In a moment of horror, he worried he'd pushed her frail body too far. He knew she was still struggling with the side effects of being ill for so long, knew she was stressed, knew she was a delicate immortal. Perhaps this had been the absolute wrong time to try to seduce her.

Dark lifted her off the ground. She seemed as light to him as a bag of leaves. What had he been thinking? Her head lolled against his shoulder. Laying her across his bed, he leaned over her, holding his ear inches from her lips. Her breath puffed gently.

He checked the pulse at her wrist.

She was alive and already stirring. Her lashes fluttered.

"Tomorrow? Gods, hold still." He moved her so she was centered on the mattress, farther from the edge of the bed. Then he sprinted into the hallway. Dark stopped at the bottom of the stairs and shouted for Susan.

After a brief commotion, the madam's blonde head appeared upside down, staring quizzically at him from the banister above.

"It's Tomorrow," he said hurriedly. "Bring ice and a cool compress and whatever else you've got." Dark didn't wait for her to answer before he sprinted back inside his room, leaving the door open wide.

"Dark?" Tomorrow started to sit up.

"Stay right where you are," he ordered so firmly she flattened herself against the bed. "I'll be just a moment in my hoard. I'm going to fetch some fairy wine—"

“No!” she snapped.

Dark froze by his closet, taken aback by her visceral reaction. “Why?” The word came out more menacing than he’d meant. Her fall had distressed him so.

Tomorrow shook her head, rustling the bedding. “My gran used a lot of it to get me on my feet again. I’ll have no more. I mean it, Dark. Keep it away from me.”

Dark glanced at the closet, feeling the beckoning call of his hoard. His instincts wanted to heal her, to help, but she was fierce in her resolve. “If you’re certain.”

“I’m certain,” she said sternly. “No more blood magic.”

Susan came into the room clutching a tall bottle of dark liquor in one hand and a kit in the other. A young maid trailed behind her, lugging a pail of ice.

“What’s happened?” Susan asked.

“She fainted and fell. If I hadn’t been there, she’d have bashed her head open on the floor,” Dark explained, sitting beside Tomorrow’s petite form on the bed, shifting the mattress with his weight. “Her nose was bleeding.”

Tomorrow swiped at her nostrils. “It’s not now. I got lightheaded, but I feel better, and the dry air in winter always gives me nosebleeds.”

Susan gave the kit to the maid. The madam removed the wax seal on the bottle while the maid prepared a cool compress, wrapping rags around chunks of ice.

Susan tapped her nail on the bottle’s label, which depicted a mountain peak. “This has a zing to it that’ll have you right as rain.”

The liquor had a spicy smell. Dark propped Tomorrow up into a sitting position, and Susan helped her take a swallow.

“Ack,” Tomorrow choked. “That’s really strong.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Mountain whiskey,” Susan said, stealing a swallow for herself. She held it out to Dark next. “You look like you need the drink as much as she does. You’re pale as a sheet.”

Dark accepted the bottle. He sniffed it before drinking. The spicy oaken taste warmed his throat. He took another swallow before handing it back. The maid readied the cool compress. He accepted it from her, sliding it along the back of Tomorrow’s neck.

Tomorrow sighed. "Ah, that's very nice, but you don't need to fuss over me. Apologies for startling all of you."

"Thank you, Katherine," Susan said, dismissing the maid. When the girl had gone from the room, Susan set aside the bottle and plopped down next to Tomorrow. "I've been meaning to ask, but I didn't want to pry. I know you've been treated by a healer, but have you ever considered visiting a mortal physician? I mean, you are largely mortal, after all, if you consider your parents. Magic never works quite right on us. I'd just hate for something to be missed because they're looking at all the wrong things, you know?"

Tomorrow hummed in her throat, as though considering the suggestion.

"That's not a bad idea," Dark said. It'd certainly make him feel a little better if a physician had a good long look at her.

"I really don't think it's necessary," Tomorrow said. She stared pointedly at the ceiling, avoiding Dark's eyes.

"If you're at all worried about the bill . . ." Susan started gently.

"It's not that," Tomorrow insisted. "I promise it's not. I've just been treated by *many* healers and physicians, mortal and immortal. I'm confident I've had all the best care the Faelands has to offer."

Dark felt his own gaze narrowing. He didn't like her choice but wasn't certain his opinion should count for much. But dammit, he wanted his wishes to matter. This was his mate.

Perhaps it was past time he told her that.

Susan's eyes darted between them. "Looks like you're in good hands, love. I'll leave you to it, then."

The madam had the greatest intuition of anyone Dark had ever met, mortal or immortal. She quit the room without another word, closing the door quietly behind her.

Dark laid Tomorrow across his lap. He used one of the cloths the maid had left to clean dried blood from her face. The bond responded to this act of tender care, warming his chest. He ran his fingers through her hair, smoothing back the ashen strands.

"Don't look so worried," she said.

"I'll look how I want," he retorted, but there was no bite in his words.

She frowned. "I feel like I ruined everything. We were about to have so much fun."

"The beauty of being immortal is there's plenty of time for fun," he soothed. "You ruined nothing, but while we're on the subject, your cousin Glen will now be getting two daggers in his leg."

Her laughter brought out that winning smile of hers. Star fire glittered in her sunrise eyes. Her teeth were pearls. Her hair, white diamonds. Even under the weather, she sparkled.

Dark laced his fingers with hers and flattened them over his breast. "Do you feel that?"

"I feel . . ." Her pale lashes fluttered.

"Mate of my heart," he whispered.

"I . . ." She blinked so rapidly her lashes blurred. "I didn't know I could do that—could have a mate. I'm mostly human." A hint of a smile tugged up the corner of her mouth. Precious delight backlit her gaze.

Then her expression darkened. She shook her head, and what little joy there was, horror replaced it.

"What's wrong?" He squeezed her fingers gently.

"It doesn't matter what we feel . . . We can't bond."

His instincts roiled. Her reaction was too strong for that to be the end of it. There was more she wasn't saying. "Where are you going?"

She stood from the bed, her cheeks paling. "To my chair. I need a nap."

"Another one?" He couldn't keep the growl out of his words.

Her next exhale was long and labored. "I'm just so tired."

He took a breath to steady his tone, then he tried again. "Tomorrow, even if you don't feel the connection of the blooming bond, we're compatible. We're mates."

Slinking across the room, she shook her head. "We can't be mates."

Her words hit him like a kick in the stomach. His nostrils flared. "Well, we are."

She waved his words away, the gesture uncharacteristically heartless. "Immortals have lots of mates. It's not as though we're true mated. You've had pairs before, surely?"

"Yes," he said through his teeth. But he hadn't wanted any of them. He wanted her, dammit.

"Good." Tomorrow sunk into the chair. She wrestled the fur blanket over her. "That's ... That's good."

"We're mates." His hands made fists in the bedding. With effort, he released the fabric before he tore it.

"You keep saying that—"

"There's something you're not telling me."

Her head came up, and he paused to give her a chance to fill in the gaps for him. She didn't deny it but didn't explain herself either.

"I sense it," he pressed, "and I don't like it."

"Dark, please." Her usually sweet face hardened. She pulled her willowy limbs in around herself, hugging the fur over her chest. "Whatever it is you think you want, you can't have it. Do you understand? Our relationship is supposed to be a farce. A plot to get me my inheritance. Remember?"

The blows just kept coming. This one about knocked him off the bed. How could he have read her so wrong? She'd wanted him earlier, hadn't she? She'd been so pliant and willing before, so eager to indulge, to touch and be touched. He could still feel the phantom of her lips at his throat, moaning her release into his neck.

And what had happened to that initial joy when he'd called her mate? Where had it gone?

"That's how it is then?" he said, voice cracking.

"I'm sorry." She picked at a stitch in the leather chair. "I need to rest." Tomorrow turned away from him, pulling her legs up to her chest.

"Fine," he barked. He stood up from the bed, needing to move his body to free it of the uneasy energy knotting his muscles. "If you're going to insist on keeping secrets from me, then you can stay over there all night."

Dark stormed from the room before she could respond. He kept stomping until he reached the entryway.

Susan called to him from the bar in the parlor, "How's our girl doing?"

Dark paused for several thumping heartbeats, his fingers flexing at his sides. He grunted absently to her, then kept moving, nearly barreling a footman over. Out on the street, the winter weather did nothing to cool the heat that churned

through him. He clung to that feeling. Surprise and shock had abandoned him to the claws of rejection. He sensed they were ready to sink in deep, a wound that wouldn't easily heal. The familiar heat of anger was easier to manage than the spiraling pit hovering just below it.

Perhaps he'd send Tomorrow to her own room. He wouldn't abandon her to her cousins, but he could put her away for now. Dark didn't have it in him to allow real harm to befall her. Glen Freest had earned a dagger in his thigh, truly, but if Tomorrow couldn't be forthright with him, then he didn't want to look at her all night. Quiet from a woman prone to ramble on about everything else felt like a taunt.

And she'd refused their bond.

She couldn't or wouldn't feel it.

She dismissed it. Dismissed him.

He paced the streets, cutting through alleys until his hair was damp with snowfall and he'd nearly gotten himself lost. The sun was setting before he found a familiar walkway and returned to the Gilded Boot. Margot was waiting for him in the dining room with dinner.

"Cook made your favorite," she said, motioning for a footman to plate his food. "Stuffed cabbage. Susan said you looked like you needed it."

Dark lowered himself into the highbacked chair beside hers. He picked up his fork, staring at the silver tines, thinking briefly of tridents and freedom from tyrants before his mind inevitably circled back to the woman in his bedroom. The woman he was frightened he was falling in love with.

"Aren't you going to ask me about Magistrate Balder?" Margot prompted.

"Go on then," he said, rubbing his fingers across the silver, letting it scratch over thick callused dragon flesh.

"Balder is preparing the engagement document for us. I gave him half his asking price today. He'll get the rest when we have it in hand." Margot grabbed a chunk of bread from the basket in the center of the table and broke it in two. She pressed it to her nose and smelled it before continuing. "He said he can't just hand it over right away. That would draw suspicion."

"How long?"

"A fortnight at the most. It's better than months."

“That’ll have to do, then.” He dug his thumb against the fork hard enough to leave lines on the pad of flesh. He felt Margot’s eyes, but she didn’t pry.

The sounds of eating flittered around him. Flatware scraping ceramic, wine sloshing against the bottom of a glass, the thumping footsteps of footmen tending to their mistress.

“Why’d you bet against us?” The question hurtled out of Dark before it had fully formed in his mind. “In your wager with Susan, why’d you bet against Tomorrow and me?”

Margot broke her bread into even smaller pieces. Briefly, her painted lips pressed together, forming a line. “Against you? What makes you think I bet *against* you two?”

“Susan bet I’d fall in love with her,” Dark guessed, basing his reasoning on the snippets of their game he’d overheard. The madam was the most intuitive person he’d ever met. It seemed only natural that she’d figured him out before he’d figured himself out.

Margot dipped her bread in her dish, soaking it in the broth. She chewed and swallowed it down before responding. “Susie guessed you’d fall in love with each other, yes.”

“And you bet against her.” He kept his tone matter of fact, but a flare of heat coiled in his belly.

“Not against your love.” She buried another fresh piece of bread in the meaty broth and cabbage mixture. “That was certain the moment we got to know the two of you. *When* you’d fall in love was up for debate. Susie thinks you’ll both be head over heels before your false engagement is finalized. I guessed you were both too cautious to give in to your wounded hearts until after.”

Dark speared a cabbage on his plate with his fork. “She’s my mate.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Margot groaned, slapping her hand against the edge of the table. “That’ll be the third gold crescent I’ve lost to you immortal lot and your magical instincts.”

His grip on his fork tightened. “Don’t be so sure. Tomorrow isn’t interested in being my mate.”

Margot lifted a brow at him. “That so? That’s got to hurt some.”

“Stings a bit,” he confessed.

She fingered her next piece of bread, one brow raised archly. "You're pulverizing your favorite food there like it stings a whole lot. Good news is, I don't lose the bet yet."

Dark smashed another stuffed cabbage under the tines. He set the utensil aside, saving the remainder of the dish from himself, and he mussed his hair around his horns. "Do you ever get the feeling there's something Tomorrow's not telling you?"

"Well, yes, but I get that same feeling about everyone I meet. Most people aren't as unhindered by the chains of propriety and as fascinatingly forthright as Susie and myself. Present company included. You're as chained up as they come, Dark."

He frowned. "I care nothing for propriety."

"Perhaps, but you've got chains all the same," Margot said, forking a bite into her mouth and continuing with her cheek stuffed full. "So does poor Tomorrow. I just hope she gets them off before they crush her flat."

Dark stood then, uninterested in consuming his food. "Thank Cook for me." He kissed Margot's cheek and quit the dining room.

Through the window above the stairs, he caught sight of the sky. The sun was gone. The clouds were as purple as the magical ones he replicated in his hoard.

He was tired, and he was hurting, and he was ready to have it out with Tomorrow. She could insist their relationship remained pretend all she wanted. He remembered well how she'd reacted to his touch, how she'd kissed him. She wanted him and had even looked joyful the second he called her mate.

He was done with not knowing why that had soured.

Dark was ready for battle as he pushed inside his bedroom. He found her nestled in the furs, curled in on herself, and his temper melted away. Bathed in candlelight, her chest rose and fell gently. White lashes feathered across her freckled cheeks.

His heart did a brutal somersault. He'd banished her to that chair for the night, had even planned to send her to her own bedroom in the hopes that she'd spill her secrets, but that was all done now. He couldn't punish her.

He went to Tomorrow and lifted her in his arms. She stirred a little but didn't open her eyes. Dark lowered her to his bed, his tail dragging back the

covers before tucking her in, blankets pulled up to her chin. He crawled in behind her and made himself comfortable, flattening his pillows to the height he wanted them.

On his side, his tail lying across her hip, he watched the candlelight flicker along her pale face. Even in slumber she appeared tired and worn down.

"Are you going to stare at me all night?" she asked drowsily. A secret smile hid itself in the corner of her mouth.

"I might," he warned. His tail curled around her waist.

She hugged the scaled length. "I think I do feel something of our bond, in a way," she confessed. "It's probably not how you feel it, though."

"What do you feel?" They whispered to each other like lovers, at a volume that could only be meant for intimate secrets surrounded by pillows. In the back of his mind, he recognized it as a moment he would cherish until the end of time.

She licked her lips, eyes squeezed shut. "Well, first there was that scoundrel who pulled an iron dagger on you. I didn't think. I just reacted when I leapt out the window. I've never been violent before."

"So fierce," he said reverently.

"And then there was that first night, when I climbed into your bed and, instead of kicking me out, you tucked me in beside you. I had the strangest desire to brick up the door and never let you leave this room again." Her eyes opened then, and the corners crinkled.

"You wanted to hoard me," he teased.

"Hm. I guess I did." Reaching for him, she touched his cheek, a tentative brush of her fingers.

He turned his head and kissed her palm. "You can tell me things, Tomorrow."

"I know," she choked, and her hand fell away. Her eyes blinked shut again. She gripped his tail so tight he felt the anguish in the bite of her nails.

He brushed his lips across her trembling chin. "Just get some rest. I know you need it."

Her breath left her in a rush, her shoulders relaxed, and her fingers softened. The lines of her face smoothed. She was asleep in seconds.

Dark didn't stare at her all night. Just for most of it.

Chapter 9



Tomorrow

Tomorrow awoke before the sun. She unwound herself from Dark's tail, then attended to her morning rituals, wrapping herself in a housecoat before going in search of Margot and Susan.

She found Susan first. The madam sat in the dining room, holding a newspaper, her honey-colored hair in a knot at her nape. She ignored the hardboiled eggs before her in favor of two steaming pots of coffee.

"I need to show you something," Susan told her. She set aside the paper and rose to her feet, ushering Tomorrow toward the entryway. The madam pulled open the front door and stepped aside. Outside, the sky was dark. Gaslights illuminated the opening.

"What is—" After adjusting to the light, Tomorrow's eyes went wide. "Is that a . . . ?"

"Our Bloody Queen of Night works fast, doesn't she?" Susan said proudly, gesturing at the gory stump of a large fae foxtail nailed to the door. Her nose wrinkled. "Wish they weren't so *wet* when she puts them up, though. We'll have to repaint the entrance again."

The madam closed the door. Tomorrow hugged herself against winter's chill, unable to process her feelings. That tail belonged to the brute who'd followed her, the man who'd been there that night ready to hurt her with his other scoundrels. But someone had finally listened. Someone with power finally cared.

It was a revelation. She wondered if anyone would have helped at all if she hadn't gotten so lucky in her friends. Her stomach did a small flip.

Susan scratched her chin contemplatively. "We'd probably better wait until the queen's through before we paint anything. There were, what, four of them

that night, plus your cousin? Maybe more if she learns of others he's used along the way."

Would bits of Glen Freest soon be hanging from that door? Gods above and below, Tomorrow hoped so. She wouldn't be personally responsible for his death, but if the Queen took justice into her own hands, as was her right, well then that didn't make her a rat, now did it?

With Susan's help, a messenger was dispatched to the Westarow estate. Margot joined them in the dining room for a quick, early breakfast.

"Do either of you ever sleep?" Tomorrow asked. The brothel kept them busy most of the day and night, and then they often attended nocturnal events just before sunrise.

"The wicked never sleep, love," Margot told her with a wink.

"We catch a few hours here and there," Susan said, sipping her coffee.

"More there than here," Margot teased. She then gave Tomorrow a rundown of her efforts with the magistrate from the day before.

Later, Margot returned to the bedroom with Tomorrow to help her dress in a few new borrowed things.

"You're right," Tomorrow said, standing in her shift, keeping her voice down so she didn't disturb the duke still asleep in the fourposter. She gestured at her borrowed clothing. "These do fit me better."

"Took them in at the waist and hemmed them myself, I did," Margot said. "I was supposed to be a seamstress in another life, but that's *brutal* work and I've always loved a good time too much."

Tomorrow held her corset in place while Margot worked the laces.

Dark stirred and sat up in bed, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. His linen nightshirt hung loose below his neck, revealing the top of a hairless chest and a pattern of black and gilded scales that trailed down the valley of his abdomen, out of sight. A pattern of scales Tomorrow wanted very much to trace until she could see where they ended.

She worked her throat and kept her thoughts to herself.

"You look like you're feeling better," he said, voice thick.

"I am feeling better." Tomorrow's chin dropped. The unpleasant memory of the night before assaulted her. The things she'd had to say to him made her stomach churn.

“Well, it’s been a few days since anyone has tried to murder her,” Margot said. “That’s got to make a person feel good. And the queen nailed a gift to our door last night.”

Tomorrow’s laugh lacked humor. “It all certainly helps.”

Margot jerked on the laces of her corset. “Is that too tight?”

“No, that’s just right,” Tomorrow said.

Margot tied it off for her, humming a bar song under her breath, then she helped her slip on her skirts.

Tomorrow slipped her arms into the sleeves of an ocean blue bodice with intricate pearl buttons at the back. She caught the shuffling of bedding in her peripheral. Dark got to his feet and closed the distance between them with slow, even strides.

The duke waved Margot off with a gesture befitting a man of his station. He pulled the back of her bodice together behind her, starting at the crest of her bottom. He worked the intricate fastenings slowly.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Margot said with a crooked grin.

Tomorrow wasn’t certain she was ready to be alone with the duke with so much left unsaid between them. Her cheeks heated. She reached for her friend, a halting gesture, but the courtesan slipped out quickly.

“What are you dressing for so early in the morning?” Hovering close, Dark’s breath blew against the back of her neck. His fingers worked the tiny pearl buttons in a steadfast manner. She felt every tug of fabric low in her belly, remembering against her wishes teasing touches and long hot kisses. The pulse between her thighs jumped.

Tomorrow squeezed the bodice in place over her chest, her nipples hardening against the fabric of her shift. “The Earl of Westarow is nocturnal. I sent him a message as soon as I awoke, asking to visit with him before he tucks in for the day. He kindly keeps me apprised of the status of my father’s estate from time to time. I’d also like to know what he and Glen argued about at the feast.”

The silence that hung in the air spanned only several heartbeats, but it felt like an epoch.

“Did you want me to come with you?” he asked finally.

Tomorrow would have liked that—she liked *him* very much, wanted him very much—but her tongue tied. The words to explain her plight were difficult

to get right, and they cost her dearly.

Margot had warned her it'd take a fortnight before they had the required engagement agreement. If Dark came with her now, they could flaunt their false relationship before the executor. The earl wanted reassurance that he was carrying out the deceased duke's wishes to the letter—like a surrogate father of sorts. Dark could help give him that peace, but she wasn't certain anymore how fair such a farce was. Mating was so sacred to the Unseelie, possibly more so than it was to other immortals.

She'd hurt him yesterday and hated that. His expression when she told him they couldn't mate—it haunted her still. Could a farcical public display mislead him now? How could she continue to use him in such a way when she knew he wanted to make their relationship real. No matter what she wanted, her path would end in vengeance, not romance.

Tomorrow hung her head. "Dark, if you require an out from our agreement —"

"I require nothing," he said, tugging the fastenings together more forcefully.

She caught his reflection in the mirror that hung over the vanity by the door, and she measured her words. "If any part of you believes that a mate bond is waiting for us at the end of this scheme of ours—"

"You were very clear yesterday that mating is not a part of your plan." His lips pursed. As quick as the lines of frustration had formed around his mouth, they were gone again, but his black eyes were mournful.

"Half of my duchy will be yours," she said warmly, but it did nothing to strip the grief from his gaze.

The lines bracketing his lips returned, and his tail whipped side to side. "I will help you do this. Then I'll take my redemption and call us even. No coins needed."

Tomorrow's shoulders sagged. "I wish I could convince you that you don't require redemption."

"You can't."

"I'd still like to give you—"

Dark finished the final fastening and spun her so that her body was flush with his. "Keep your wealth, Sunshine. Use it to buy your gran more orchards,

add more copper bathtubs and fruit trees and sitting rooms to your new estates. Spend it on *you*. I don't want it."

Tomorrow fidgeted with the hem of her bodice, smoothing the satin in place over the top of her skirt, uncertain what to say next. When words continued to fail her, she rose up on her tiptoes and laid a chaste kiss on the bottom of his jaw. "Get dressed, then. We can always argue about what I owe you later."

* * *

They borrowed a carriage that belonged to the Gilded Boot. Tomorrow sat in the cab, winter quilt pulled up to her chin, trying to calculate in her head how much she owed Susan and Margot for all their assistance and loans to her these past few weeks.

She gave up quickly. The amount was more than she could sum up without pen and paper. Another shiver wracked her body, and she clung to her quilt, wishing for heat.

On the bench seat across from her, Dark rolled his eyes. "You'd be much warmer if you stopped being stubborn and simply sat closer to me."

"I'm fine," Tomorrow insisted.

She'd been worried that once they were alone again, he'd press her about their relationship, but he hadn't. No, it was worse than that. He touched her instead, tempting her with affection and nearness and his damnable striking presence. He'd replaced questions she couldn't answer with seduction she couldn't give in to.

Her toes were ice in her boots, and she was at great risk of chipping a tooth with the way they chattered, but she refused to take further advantage of this good man.

"You are not fine," he grumbled.

Every time temptation reared its beguiling head, she just thought of the hurt on his face from last night and the urge to give in to him vanished. "I'll s-survive."

"You're being ridiculous. We share a blasted bed, for the divines' sakes." Dark left his seat, and the cab lurched briefly as he planted himself next to her.

Warmth swamped her side. She gritted her teeth, fighting against the desire to lean against him. She scooted as close to the curtained window as the small

space allowed. “We do share a bed, but— Oh.”

His tail slunk beneath her blanket and gathered around her middle, as soothing as a hot water bottle. Unable to fight it, she laid her hands against the scaled length, warming them.

Dark hissed through his teeth. “Gods, your poor little fingers. Are you trying to make them fall off?”

He hunted under the quilt and found her hands, swallowing them in his pleasantly balmy grip.

Sighing, Tomorrow’s head fell back against the seat. “Ugh. Please stop being so nice to me. I really don’t deserve it.”

He laughed at her. They bumped along the cobblestone street, and after a few minutes, she didn’t need the quilt anymore. Dark’s tail had warmed her to a more comfortable temperature. She let the blanket fall to her lap. Her hands no longer required his, but she didn’t have the will to reclaim them.

Craning her neck, she stared at the window, realizing belatedly that the curtains were still fully closed. She probably looked like an idiot, staring dumbly at fabric. She really should let go of him now.

As though he heard her thoughts, he laced their fingers together, staking his claim.

“We’re almost there now,” she said, trying to tug free.

Dark lifted her right hand to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. The reminder of his hot touches from the prior day made her stomach bottom out.

“We’ve a while to go yet,” he said drolly.

And he was right.

Maybe right? She’d suddenly lost the ability to tell time.

His next kiss was at the sensitive juncture between her thumb and forefinger. Another brushed across the bed of her thumbnail. After that, he turned her hand over and kissed the pad of her palm languidly. A tremor went down her arm, but it had nothing to do with the winter weather.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Acting the way a courting gentleman would.”

“There’s no one in here to benefit from your acting,” she reminded him.

He ignored her, pressing his lips to the pad of her thumb and working his way down the digit to the center of her palm.

“Dark,” she said through her teeth.

His eyes shifted toward her briefly. “Speak your piece,” he said, then his lips teased the pulse at her wrist.

Her lashes fluttered. Words failed her momentarily. “Please stop trying to seduce me.”

“Hm . . .” His mouth in a twist, he acted as though he were giving the matter great thought. “No.” He kissed the pulse at her wrist again, then followed an invisible trail down her arm.

Her skin pebbled, and something molten spread through her belly. She pressed her thighs together. “*Dark*,” she squeaked, “stop trying to seduce me, or I’ll make you walk to Westarow.”

His laughter vibrated against the sensitive inner flesh of her arm. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Fine, then.” She jerked her arm free. “Quit it, or *I’ll* walk to the estate by myself.”

He relinked their fingers, trapping her hand against his warm thigh. “Awfully cold out there.”

Tomorrow shivered sympathetically. “I’m just trying to be fair to you,” she whined. “Stop making it so hard.”

His smile was as threatening as it was captivating. “Spare me your kindness, then. I don’t deserve it, anyway.” He lowered his head and whispered in her ear, “Instead of being fair to me, you can let me kiss you. I’ll get on my knees before you right now and kiss *all* of you.”

“Well, that’s just . . .” The image of him kneeling in the cramped space, her skirts rucked up to her waist, legs flung over his broad shoulders, had her voice pitching high. She swallowed to clear it. “That is counterproductive to our aim here.”

“Counterproductive to your aim maybe.” His tail swept low, flicking the edges of her dress up over her boots. “My aim is to see you come again.”

Face flushed, her resolve slipped slightly. Gods, her release yesterday had felt so fucking good. Would it really be terribly selfish if she allowed him to—

“Oh, thank the divines,” she breathed as the carriage began to slow. “We’re here.”

* * *

Westarow was a sprawling urban estate with twice the usual amount of staff. Several footmen greeted them, taking their coats and gloves and using a special broom to clear slush from their boots. Because the sun had nearly risen above the horizon, she lit incense at the altar of the Divine Day and the Divine Night in the foyer. Butterflies filled her stomach. She placed a hand against it, smothering the sensation.

The butler, an aged mortal, guided them into a well-lit library to await the earl. Lord Bjorn Aaberg had been caught up in a meeting with estate advisors. He’d visit with them shortly, the butler explained before quitting the room.

Tomorrow explored the antiquated space. It smelled of old books and beeswax. The furniture was plush and inviting. She ran her finger over the spines on the nearest shelf. They were organized by topic: nature on the display before her, sciences on the one beside it.

Dark kept close, casting his great shadow over her in the gaslit room. Tomorrow repressed another groan. She even liked the way his shadows touched her. How pathetic did that make her?

Very, very pathetic.

“It could be to your advantage if the earl walked in and found us embracing,” he said softly.

A tingle tickled the back of her neck. Only Dark could make a wholesome word like embrace sound like pure licentiousness. “I’m not wholly certain that’s necessary.”

“Just a thought,” he said, sounding innocent enough, but his slanted smile was smug and sinful. “I do think I hear someone coming.”

She was about to accuse him of fibbing, but then her long ears picked up the footsteps as well.

“Oh.” Tomorrow licked her lips. Her thoughts spun. Was it actually a good idea to make a show of kissing him now, or did she just *want* to kiss him?

“Better hurry up and decide, Sunshine,” he taunted.

Tomorrow threw her arms around his neck, glaring up at him. "Just . . . behave yourself, will you please?"

"Never," he said, then he lowered his head and kissed her.

It was a kiss that made the ground shift beneath her feet, made the air swell and then go thin. His large hands held her tight. He engulfed her, and she felt warm and safe and *wanted*. The caress of his lips was tender, not demanding at all, and that somehow made it so much worse. His kisses felt like a tease. They wound her up with their promise of more.

Wanting all of him, Tomorrow molded her body to his. Hands dropping to his chest, she felt the tremor of pleasure ripple through him, and oh, that was so intoxicating. She had no business making this extraordinary dragon man want her so, yet there she was with just a kiss melting the two of them together.

"Ahem." The voice at the door was feminine.

Tomorrow pulled away, surprised that it was not the earl coming to meet with them at all, but his daughter, the mother they'd met at the fae feast.

"Lady Moen," Tomorrow said hurriedly, parting from Dark with such vigor she nearly tripped over her own feet. "I beg your pardon."

"Apologies," Dark said, not sounding sorry in the least. "The mate bond is new for us."

Though technically not a lie, Tomorrow shot him a warning look. His returning grin was full of daring.

"Please, call me Frances and keep your apologies," the lady said, batting a friendly hand at them. Her fae skin was a shade of rose pink. She wore her lush black hair pulled into a knotted plait at her nape. "I remember the blooming bond all too well. You have nothing to apologize for."

"You're very kind, my lady," Tomorrow said with a polite bow of her head. "Frances," she added, stumbling over the name. Try as she might, the gentry still made her very uncomfortable.

"I came to warn you that Father is still caught up," Frances said, her tone friendly. "His business is taking longer than he expected. I thought I might come and offer you some secondary entertainment while you waited. But now I can see you're perfectly capable of amusing yourselves."

Tomorrow's laugh was high and unnatural. She clamped her lips together to make it stop, certain that spending more time alone with Dark wouldn't end

well. "Um, actually, my lady—Frances—I'd love some secondary entertainment."

"Wonderful," Frances said. "Would you like a tour? We can start there and see where that gets us."

"I'd love one." Tomorrow made her way over to her, stepping carefully, trying not to make a fool of herself again.

"You go on ahead," Dark said, finding a comfortable armchair to sit in beside a box of cigars. His concession surprised her. He was usually so reluctant to leave her side.

"It was my understanding," Tomorrow said to the lady, "that you and your family lived in Whiteholm outside of River Row. Isn't that far from here?"

"Not so far," Frances told her, guiding her into the corridor. "But when my husband has work in the city, we stay with Father to be close to him."

"That sounds lovely," Tomorrow said, surprised that she was already beginning to feel less distressed in the noblewoman's presence. Frances dressed like a refined person, and her coiffure was primped and perfect, but there was something about her that made her unexpectedly approachable. Tomorrow couldn't put her finger on what it was.

And then something scaled and red swept into the corridor. Ducking, Tomorrow squawked in surprise and covered her head.

"Iso, dear, be more careful," the lady scolded her familiar. "I apologize for her. She's accustomed to having the run of the house."

The little red dragon alighted on her mistress's shoulder like a great bird.

Tomorrow's heart was still racing, but she laughed it off. "Oh, it's all right."

Well, that explained why Tomorrow felt so comfortable. Lady Frances was a witch. Most witches were viewed as outcasts in society, the bargain of their piece of soul too taboo and misunderstood to make them mainstream. As a bastard, Tomorrow had always felt like a similar outcast. Understood by few and wanted by fewer.

"If I may be so bold," Tomorrow said, lowering her voice, "I've always felt a certain kinship to witches, and I'm curious—"

"It didn't hurt much when I gave Iso a piece of my soul," Frances said with a knowing grin. "The piece formed right in my hand from one of my tears when I wanted it, and it looked like a crystalized drop of water. Iso surprised me by swallowing it whole as we made our bargain."

Tomorrow guffawed. "You must get asked that a lot."

Frances stroked her familiar's red neck. "More than you'd think." They stopped at a sitting room adorned with an impressive standing clock. "Now if *I* may be so bold," the lady said as Tomorrow took in the clock, admiring the intricate workings visible through a glass face, "you seemed a bit eager to escape the library. And your escort. Is the bond going well for you?"

Tomorrow flushed. If she was that obvious, then perhaps she owed Dark an apology. "It's, well, it's complicated. But please know His Grace has done absolutely nothing untoward."

"Oh, I didn't mean to suggest otherwise. It's just, I have some experience with a complicated bonding," Frances said as her dragon nuzzled under her chin. "I myself was reluctant to put my heart on the line again after it'd been wounded by another." Her next breath was wistful. "And now I couldn't be happier. I'm glad I opened myself to the opportunity, if you know what I mean?"

"I do," Tomorrow said, and her face fell. "Unfortunately, in my case it's not my heart I'm worried about wounding. It's his."

Chapter 10



Dark

Dark made it through half a cigar before the earl joined him in the library. A gentleman many centuries old, he had the markings of Lunar heritage: short, twisted horns and a tail like a lion. He wore his golden hair pulled back in a neat queue.

"I hope you don't mind if I turn down the gaslights," the earl said, pausing near the sconce beside the door, working the knob below the glass fixture. "Nocturnal eyes don't do well in overly-lit spaces."

"By all means." Dark stood to shake the earl's extended hand.

"Your Grace," the earl greeted politely, clasping Dark's arm at the wrist. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"I am grateful for your hospitality, Lord Aaberg."

"Do call me Bjorn," he said with a swift smile, taking a cigar from the box at the side table before sitting in the armchair across from the duke. "When I enjoy cigars with a man, I prefer to do it without all the formalities."

"Agreed." Dark glanced at the archway that led out into the hall for signs that the women had returned. "Tomorrow will be back shortly, I'm sure. She's taking a tour with Lady Moen."

"Excellent. Gives us time to gossip." The earl's tail flipped playfully at that, the furry end brushing across the wool of his trousers. He used a silver, rectangular cutter to clip the end of his cigar. Bjorn patted his pockets in search of a lighter.

"Allow me," Dark said, taking the cigar from the earl. He dug his nail briefly into the palm of his hand, just enough to break the skin. With his mixed heritage, Dark wasn't much of a blood mage, but this he could easily manage. He blew on

the end of the cigar, and smoke escaped his nostrils. His breath grew so hot the cigar lit with a spark. The sweet earthy scent of tobacco filled his lungs.

Bjorn took his cigar back with a grateful bow of his head. "Bravo, Darko. Thank you." He puffed on the end, blowing gray smoke out his nostrils. "I hope you can forgive an old man his greedy curiosities, but you and Miss Easton appeared well-acquainted at the fae feast the other morning. Should I be expecting a special announcement in the papers soon?"

"She's my mate," he said honestly. "I do plan to propose. Though, I haven't yet picked the venue for such an important display. I'm a guest of this court and not from this province. Perhaps you could help me by offering a suggestion."

"Ah." The earl's face brightened. "Well, that would depend on what sort of hurry you're in. There are lots of romantic venues in River Row."

"Dragons are as possessive as the rumors suggest," Dark said, his tone light. "Sooner is better than later."

Bjorn grinned around his cigar. "In that case, the king and queen are hosting a winter ball in four days' time. Admittedly, the food isn't my favorite, but if Miss Easton enjoys dancing, it can't be beaten. The music is always a treat, and they employ mages for decorations that are as elaborate as they are magical."

A cloudy smog gathered above them as they enjoyed their cigars. Dark listened for voices and approaching steps in the hall.

The earl made a contented sound in his throat. His hazel eyes had gone unexpectedly glossy. "I should warn you, I'm a bit of a sentimental man. Young love always reminds me of my bride, may she walk the stars in peace. Yours especially so, you see, because my Alice was mortal with only distant fae ancestry. So little I barely recognized her as a mate when we met."

"No forgiveness necessary," Dark said, surprised by the show of emotion from the nobleman. It didn't bother him, per se, it just wasn't done amongst the Unseelie. "Tomorrow is immortal, thankfully, but I can see why she reminds you of one. So much of her is human, and like you and your Alice, we are of two worlds."

"Quite right you are." The earl gazed off into the distance, eyes going unfocused. Smoke billowed lightly around his angular face. "Concerned family tried to warn me off the match. They told me we'd never be able to grow our bond into a true mate pairing because she didn't have magical instincts. She

couldn't feel the blooming bond pull. They worried that I would outlive her and never be able to nurture our bond into that rare and coveted soul link, but neither detail deterred me."

"Now you'll have to forgive me for my curiosity," Dark said, snuffing out his cigar stump in a glass ashtray. "Were they right about true mating?"

"They were." Bjorn smiled, and the lines near his eyes crinkled. "But I was also right when I said it didn't matter. I never missed it. There are things more important than that soul-tie that the fae romanticize excessively. And really, I have no desire to share my thoughts with anyone. I'd like those to remain my own most of the time. Gods, the trouble I would have gotten myself into if I'd accidentally sent her my thoughts during an argument." The earl chuckled at that, and Dark joined him.

"It's supposed to be peaceful, true bonding to a mate," Dark noted.

"I found peace in my mate without a completed bond. Most immortals don't understand that, and they lose out on so much because of it. There are so many *other* ways to connect to a person. Even now, there are other matches, other mates that I come across from time to time. Still, I have no desire to replace the mate I had because no magical binding will ever beat *love*."

"Our mate bond is as one-sided as yours was. I won't miss true mating either," Dark said, and as he spoke the words, he was absolutely certain they were sincere. In Tomorrow he could have what he really needed: peace and tenderness. To hell with the rest.

He'd just have to convince her that was all she needed too.

As though their conversation had summoned her, Tomorrow entered the library, cheeks rosy with recent laughter. A ruddy-colored runt of a dragon perched on her shoulder—another ferocious thing that appeared to already be taken with her.

"I wish I could keep her," she told Dark, stroking the dragon's neck. The little creature leaned into her petting.

Frances trailed them inside. "Iso is a lovely companion," she said, "so long as you stay out of her hoard. She has some bad kidnapping habits."

Tomorrow's gaze met with Dark's, and the corners of her copper eyes crinkled.

"It's the woman of the hour," the earl said warmly. "Please sit with us." He vacated his chair, pulling over a highbacked wooden one so that Tomorrow could be near the duke.

The dragon took to the air as Tomorrow made herself comfortable.

"We'll leave you to it, then," Frances said, and Iso swooped around her head. "It was very nice seeing you again, Tomorrow."

Witch and familiar departed together.

"Here you are," Bjorn said, fishing folded parchment from an inner pocket of his brocade jacket. "I had this put together for you. A quick summary of the Easton duchy finances. The liquid assets. The properties, farmlands, tenants, and a summary of costs vs. rents and assorted income."

Tomorrow accepted the paper. She held it in both hands for a moment without unfolding it. As though she were gathering herself, she rested it on her lap. "Before I get into all that, there was something I wanted to ask you, Lord Aaberg."

"Bjorn, please," the earl said kindly. "You may speak freely, my dear."

Tomorrow chewed her cheek a moment.

Dark watched her, wishing he could think of something to say that might bolster her.

"You know," Bjorn said, filling the silence, "I was shocked when your father named me, of all people, as his executor. We'd been rivals all our lives, I'd thought. We went to all the same events, battled over the best staff members, chased after all the same lovers. I wouldn't have called him an enemy, but I certainly wouldn't have called him a friend."

"Really?" Tomorrow's mouth quirked. "He surprised me too. Before his will was read, I could count on one hand the number of times I saw him."

The earl crossed one leg over the other, casting his gaze thoughtfully up toward the ceiling. "He was an interesting man. Strong, competitive, intelligent. Secretive. He liked to play his cards close to his chest, if you get my meaning."

"Why do you think he chose you?" Tomorrow asked, her white brows pinched together.

"His solicitor solved that mystery for me, actually. When he brought the news, he said the former duke had selected me because I was 'the best father he knew'. The late duke knew a great many things, but how to be a father wasn't one

of them. I think he hoped I'd fill in and do right by you, and at that I am trying, truly. It's the reason why I told you I wanted a good match for you. And that I'd be watching closely as any father would."

Tomorrow sighed. "I bet it never occurred to him the danger he'd put me in . . ." Her chin lowered and her voice dropped. "My lord—Bjorn—you had words the other morning with Glen Freest. My cousin."

"Ah." The earl uncrossed his legs and leaned over to make use of the ashtray, tapping spent tobacco against the glass rim. "I took some liberties Lord Freest is not happy about, or I should say, he thinks I took some liberties."

"What liberties?" Dark asked. Mention of Glen had him digging his fingers into the arm of his seat so hard his thick nails threatened to tear the leather.

"My son-in-law, the Bargainer, has a talent for . . . what's the polite term for it? A talent for *plotting*, let's say. After you fell ill, rumors slowly reached me that you'd named your cousin as the one responsible—"

"He did it," Tomorrow said, shifting uncomfortably in her chair. "He poisoned me, my lord."

"That was my fear," Bjorn said somberly. His fingers tapped an anxious rhythm on his lap. "With the Bargainer's help, I've fooled the Freest family into believing a clause has been added to your father's will, one that states that, should any harm befall you, should you die suspiciously, for example, the duchy shall go to the crown at my discretion, not to the next of kin."

Tomorrow's eyes went big and round. "No wonder Glen was so angry the other morning."

"That was smart work, Bjorn," Dark said.

"Don't thank me just yet," Bjorn said. "I added the clause, but it's been made clear to me that it wouldn't stand up to the scrutiny of court. Your father didn't actually give me the authority to invent clauses, you see. It's good that you've found each other. It's even better that you're moving quickly. I encourage you both to press forward before any Freest examines those documents and discovers this for themselves."

"Thank you all the same," Tomorrow said, her voice small. "Your attempt to help means a great deal, even if it may only slow them down a little while longer."

In the carriage on the way home, Dark watched Tomorrow out of the corner of his eye. She read over the document Bjorn had created for her. Her forehead

wrinkled and her lips were pinched.

"What's wrong?" he asked, not for the first time. The first time, all he'd gotten as a response was grumbled syllables. Dragons were not known for their patience, but he was doing his best, gripping the cushioned seat beneath him so hard his nails sprung short claws.

Tomorrow set the papers down forcefully. "There just aren't as many liquid assets as there were before I took ill. And two of the properties are completely upside down now. Bjorn has done the safe thing, spending resources as needed to keep others afloat as I asked him too, but . . ." With a sigh, her fingers wrinkled the pages. "When I imagined finally claiming my duchy, the very first thing I wanted to do was purchase the orchards my gran lost."

"Thankfully, you're immortal and so is your gran," Dark reminded her. "Plenty of time to fix what's broken, turn a profit, and get back what's hers. With time, you could give her even *more* than she's lost. She'll understand."

Tomorrow's smile was brittle, and whatever she was about to say, he watched her swallow those words, delicate muscles bobbing in her throat.

"What is it?" Dark demanded as gently as he could, but the words came out half-growl. "Hang it all, Sunshine, say what you were about to say."

Tomorrow shook her head, jerking the quilt up around her lap, over his winding tail. "It's just . . . My gran spent her last coin doing everything she could to get me on my feet again, to get me out of that dratted sickbed. Centuries of hard work gone in less than a year, all for *me*. It's only fair that I return what's she's lost as quickly as possible. Before Glen wins."

"We'll have an engagement agreement in a fortnight. Glen isn't going to . . ." Dark's voice trailed away.

Get me on my feet again, she'd said. That string of words echoed in his head, and his next thought stuck in his throat. She'd said that before when she'd spoken of tonics, spells, prolonged illness, but she never spoke of being *healed*.

I don't know how much time I've got—those were her words the night they'd met. He'd assumed she was worried about future attempts on her life, but what if she was referring to a *past* attempt.

The first one.

His hands were moving before realization fully dawned, as though his muscles had interpreted the truth of things and his mind was still catching up.

He bundled her into his lap, his hand roughly stroking her cheek, making her meet his eyes.

"Tomorrow," he said, his voice breaking, "are you dying?"

She exhaled, sharp and quick. He felt the puff of breath against his lips, and then her mouth trembled. "Oh Dark, please understand that I never meant to mislead you. I never meant to tell you half-truths. It's just that I'm having such a hard time coming to terms with it all myself. Saying it out loud makes it more real than I can stand, and I don't *want* to die, you see?"

Dark's eyes burned and welled until she was a pale blur before him. He blinked to clear his vision, and a tear broke free, slicking down his cheek, catching in his stubble. The sweet and silly peace he'd been chasing since they'd met, the hope he saw in her—it was shrinking away from him, slipping out of his grasp.

"How much time do you have?" Misery shrank his voice.

"I'm so so so sorry," she chanted, hanging her head. "I swear I never meant to . . . to . . ."

"Make me fall in love with you," he finished for her. An invisible band tightened around his ribs.

"My dear sweet Dark, but I love you so." Her breath hiccupped. Her nose ran. She reached for him, brushing shaking fingers along his jaw. "Please don't look so devastated. I beg you."

"It can't be helped. I *am* devastated."

She dropped her brow against his chest. Her hot tears soaked into the linen of his shirt. His limbs felt leaden. Dark palmed the back of her head, knotting his fingers in the short ashen hair there, what little remained from the poison that was killing her.

"Tell me how long you have," he pleaded. "I . . . I don't *want* to know, but I *have* to know. Don't spare me or yourself this time. Tell me quickly, like you're ripping off a bandage."

She flattened her cheek against the space above his heart, and the organ stammered. Slowly, she sucked air in through her nose, then released it out her mouth. "Any day now, Dark. At this point, every breath I take is a borrowed one."

Her confession was an iron dagger in his heart. Pain seared through him from that gaping wound. Hugging her close, he rocked her in his arms, trying to

will the ghost of mortality far, far away from her.

A woman who radiated sweetness, who was honey incarnate, sunshine in all the darkest places, should never be stalked by death.

He buried his face in her hair and sobbed.

Chapter 11



Dark

The duke knew he was being humored when Tomorrow finally agreed to let a mortal physician examine her. Back inside the Gilded Boot, Dark relayed the devastating news to Susan and Margot, and the doctor was summoned posthaste.

Tomorrow sat patiently on the edge of his bed, flanked by the courtesans who seemed as desperate as he was to stay close to her now, as if together they could keep death away with constant vigil.

Dr. Bandile arrived quickly despite the poor weather. He had a booming laugh that carried down the hall, deep umber skin, and thick black hair. Dark might have been tempted to like the mortal if the circumstances had been vastly different, if his heart hadn't been jammed so hard into his throat.

The duke introduced himself to the physician, pulling him aside. He fished two ancient wyvern coins out of the purse in his pocket and handed them over. "For your trouble, sir."

Dr. Bandile studied the coins with one raised brow. He handed them back to the duke. "That's far too much, Your Grace. Miss Susan and I have a regular arrangement already. I see those in her house who need it for a seasonal fee."

"All the same," Dark said, trying to give the coins back.

The doctor stopped him with a gentle touch on his arm. His brown eyes were kind. "You realize I hope, Your Grace, that overpaying me now will not change the findings of my examination."

Dark's lungs hitched. "I . . ." He rubbed at a spot on his chest that wouldn't stop aching. It seemed completely unfair to own such a vast fortune but not be

able to use it to purchase the one thing he wanted most of all. "I do understand that, of course. Just *please*."

That desperate word hung there pregnant.

"I will take very good care of my patient," Dr. Bandile vowed. He turned his kind eyes on Tomorrow.

Her lips quirked weakly. She was getting tired. Dark saw it in the deepening smudges beneath her eyes, in the way she blinked heavily and her slender shoulders drooped.

"My dear," the doctor said to her, "would you be more comfortable if Miss Margot and Miss Susan assisted me today?"

Her chin dipped in assent. "Thank you, yes."

Glancing at the duke, Dr. Bandile made a sweeping gesture toward the door. "Your Grace, if you would please grant us some privacy."

Tomorrow sent Dark a sunshine smile. "Actually, I prefer him right where he is, if it's all right with you, Doctor."

Humans usually followed strict moral codes and had strange ideas about the vulnerability of unmarried women. It pleased Dark that this one didn't make a fuss about any of that. His face remained placid and free of judgement.

"If it pleases you," the physician said softly. "Miss Margot, Miss Susan, if you could help our friend undress down to her shift . . . Thank you kindly."

The doctor's examination was methodical and thorough. He produced a stethoscope from a brown leather bag. He placed the rubber pieces in his small mortal ears and held the tubed end high on Tomorrow's breast. After listening to her heart and lungs for a time, he placed his ear directly against her chest. He did the same to her back, listening in the silence.

He took her blood pressure twice, peeked inside her nose and mouth, ran a wooden tool gently over her teeth, and felt along the column of her throat. He checked her skin for rashes and other abrasions. Dark fought down the urge to snarl when the doctor's examination required that he look over more intimate areas. He tested her reflexes. He took her temperature with a glass thermometer. He pulled a second that appeared identical to the first and took another reading. He recorded all his findings in a small black journal.

Dr. Bandile insisted on speaking privately with her after that. Out in the hall, Dark paced. Margot and Susan stood with him. They kept silent, but they

hovered close, sensing correctly in their intuitive way that he didn't want to talk but didn't want to be alone either.

When the door opened, the three of them came to attention at once. Margot held Susan's hand, and the physician joined them in the corridor, his bag at his side.

"Well?" Dark said eagerly.

"It's as she has told you already. Her condition is fatal," the doctor said, his voice clear and solemn.

Numbness seeped down his body until it reached the tips of his fingers and toes and tingled there unpleasantly. Dark's hands flexed, nails digging into the wool of his trousers.

Dr. Bandile allowed the duke a moment to absorb the news before he continued, "Looking at her, one would believe that Miss Tomorrow was a vibrant immortal woman. There are no outward signs of aging, but after close examination, she has the lungs and heart function that I only see in elderly humans not long for this world."

"And there's nothing that can be done using mortal medical science?" Dark's voice broke. Susan placed a comforting hand high on his back.

"I'm afraid not. If humans knew how to repair tissue and organs that had worn out, we'd be as immortal as the fae by now." Dr. Bandile set his bag down beside his feet and used his hands to gesture while he spoke. "Best I can tell after interviewing my patient, the poison injected into her body nearly a year ago was a mixture of chemical and curse. With the damage done to her organs, it was blood magic that kept her from perishing quickly. I'm no mage, but I do have a basic understanding of the impact such magic can have on the body. I see it from time to time while working at the dispensary when someone purchases a bad spell on the street. Blood magic functions on life force, and each time it's cast on a person, it leaves a trace of itself behind. When used in great, great excess, this trace becomes quite toxic to those of us without a natural immunity to it like the Unseelie possess."

Dark understood what he was being told in some faraway place in his mind. The rest of his thoughts were in a jumble, unable to grab hold of any one thing. He stood there frozen, a black cold seeping through his insides to replace the numbness, turning his stomach.

Margot swiped at her running nose and sniffled. “Then all those potions and tonics and spells used to preserve her are now what’s killing her?”

The physician nodded glumly.

“Dr Bandile,” Susan said, and her indigo eyes glistened with tears, “isn’t there anything we can do for her?”

“Keep her comfortable and let her rest. Her tired body needs it,” he said. “And love her. Be with her. Don’t let the poor woman die alone. It’s all anyone can do.”

* * *

Tomorrow

After the physician left, Tomorrow slept. She awoke hours later to a room lit by candles, feeling as though she hadn’t rested at all. Her eyes were gritty, and her limbs ached dully.

Dark entered, pushing a wheeled cart. He looked dreadful: disheveled and scowling. An invisible weight shoved down her shoulders, and a desire to make a confession to him overwhelmed her.

Dark pushed bread and broth and refreshments into the room. He helped her sit up, stacking pillows behind her while she thought over the words she wanted to say. He took the stool from the vanity and set it between her bedside and the cart. Perched on the cushioned seat that was much too small for his bulky frame, he stirred the bowl of broth like he planned to spoon-feed her, and her gut pinched with remorse.

“Dark,” she whispered.

His soulful black eyes were as vast and bottomless as the night sky he so admired. “Are you hungry?”

Biting her lip, she shook her head. “I need to tell you something.”

He set the spoon down against the ceramic rim of the bowl and shifted to face her fully, resting his hands on his thick thighs. “More secrets?” His smile did not reach his eyes.

“Not exactly.” She worried the edges of her blankets. “I just need you to know that it’s my fault—er, well, it’s Glen’s fault mostly, of course. But after I was bed-bound, the fairy healers, they warned me what could happen if I kept drinking their wine.”

Dark brushed an errant strand of her hair behind her pointed ear. The gentle gesture was full of understanding. "You were trying to get better."

"I was doomed either way," Tomorrow said, and her voice squeaked. "I desperately wanted a chance at revenge. I was never going to get that trapped in a bed, dying slowly on the other side of the river. The Seelie have special laws about a last statement made by the deceased, especially one made by nobility. So I wrote my declaration, specifying Glen Freest as my murderer. My gran has it still. Then I came here to get my inheritance so that when I died a *duchess*, the Tree Court and the Lunar Court would be forced to do something about my last testament. Gran would get her orchards back, and Glen would get his comeuppance finally."

"Why does this sound like a confession, Sunshine?" His smile was pinched, tone reproachful. "Any reasonable person would have made all those same choices."

"But I feel like I'm disappointing everyone." She rubbed the bedding between her fingers until the fabric warmed and the pad of her thumbs felt raw. "My mother named me as she did because she hoped I'd always have the promise of tomorrow, and now it feels like I'm letting her down, too. Is that silly?"

"The silliest," he said, and the corners of his glassy eyes crinkled briefly.

"When I was a fledgling and I started aging so much slower than my mortal friends, my gran was very excited. Finally, she would get to keep someone she loved. I feel like I—"

"Need redemption for dying?" He lifted the bowl that seemed too hot to consume, steaming the way it did, but his dragon skin appeared unbothered.

"Yes." She felt the corner of her mouth tug upward. "In that regard, I'm as silly as you, I guess."

He blew on the broth to cool it. "A wise woman once told me that only the gods have foresight. We're just doing the best we can down here, so let's blame them and be done with it."

Tomorrow's next breath caught. She would very much have liked to pass the blame on to anyone else for all the pain she was causing him now. She bit down hard to still her trembling lip. "Yes," she whispered. "Let's blame them."

Dark lifted a spoonful of scalding broth toward her.

Tomorrow turned her head away. “Dark, sweetheart, that will melt my throat.”

Sheepishly, he dropped the spoon back into the bowl with a plop. “I suppose I’m a bad judge of such things.”

They grinned at each other, and for a moment he looked more like his usual self.

“I’m really not hungry anyway,” she told him.

He set the bowl aside, fidgeting on the bench seat. “I just needed to do something for you.”

“Is it a bond thing?” Though it wasn’t something she’d ever expected to experience for herself, she knew there were bonding rituals dictated by instincts, like feeding and bathing and nurturing one’s mate to help grow the connection.

“It’s a ‘the love of my life is dying and there’s nothing I can do about it’ thing.” He poured her a cup of tea instead. “If you’ll please indulge me now.”

“In that case, I like honey in my tea,” she said helpfully.

Dark added so much of the golden nectar to her cup it nearly overflowed. She accepted it from him, fighting down an impious giggle, allowing the ceramic to warm her hands. Because he was watching her, she sipped it. The tea was so hot and sweet it made her teeth hurt. The lines of stress bracketing his mouth softened, so she forced down a bit more.

“I’m tired again,” she said, patting his side of the bed. “Will you lie with me for a bit?”

As he rounded the mattress, she abandoned the drink that was more honey than tea to the cart.

He shucked his boots, crawled under the covers, and pulled her close. His hot, leathery tail wound around her leg.

“What can I do for you?” he asked so quietly she sensed he hadn’t meant for her to hear the question at all.

She answered him anyway. “Just keep the monsters at bay as best you can.”

Dark pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “I can do that.”

* * *

When Tomorrow awoke next, half the candles had burned out, casting creeping shadows across the paneled walls. She sucked in a nervous breath, and Dark stirred beside her.

His tail crept from her leg to wrap around her waist, hugging her tight. "Tomorrow?"

She hid her face in his shirt. He was still fully dressed, and his waistcoat was wrinkled.

"I'm all right," she told him. "I feel better after sleeping so much. I'm just jumping at shadows again."

His heat was a comfort, but then he left the bed, exposing her to the cool air, and his soothing tail languidly followed. She wanted to grab that tail and hold it close.

"Where are you going?" she asked, squinting in the dark.

Dark rounded to her side and lifted her in his arms. "I'm hoarding you until I feel better," he said. Wrapping her in the blankets, he hefted her toward the closet.

Her head felt heavy. She rested it against his shoulder. "How worried should I be that you might not let me out ever again?"

"Moderately worried," he confessed, and she sniggered. He tucked a corner of blanket over her arm. "But there will be no shadows in there to jump at. Not unless I want there to be."

The knob clicked twice, and dusky, magical light illuminated the threshold. Carrying her easily, he brought her inside his tower and climbed the steps to the top. The gilded telescope stood angled toward the sky. A plush armchair faced the broad window, one that usually sat on the first floor.

Apparently, Dragons could redecorate their magical hoards however they liked. Not for the first time, Tomorrow was jealous of his connection to such a fantastical place.

Instead of taking her to the wide bed as she had anticipated, he dropped into the armchair and sat her in his lap. The sky darkened and filled with bright stars. They watched them quietly, his tail hugging her hip under the blankets. Her eyes were heavy, but she didn't want to sleep.

"Should I put you to bed?" he asked, his voice low.

She shook her head against his shoulder, hesitant to explain herself. But then he was so big and broad beneath her. So strong. She was certain that if anyone could handle her fears, it was her dragon duke.

"It scares me how much I'm sleeping," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "What if I go to sleep again and . . ."

". . . don't wake back up," he finished for her. He pressed his lips to the top of her head and breathed deeply of her hair. Then he pointed to the stars that he loved, drawing her gaze out the window, and her thoughts with it. "That one is called Thorvald. And that one over there is known as Sword of the Fierce, and it reminds me of you."

She chuckled, giving in to his distraction. "I don't think I've ever held a sword in my life."

"Still so fierce," he insisted, snuggling her close. "My mate leaps into dangerous alleyways, charges at wolves, lets fairies bite her, and tames dragons."

Her next laugh shook the blankets. "There's absolutely nothing tame about you. And your mate also jumps at shadows and has never met an earthworm that didn't make her scream from fright."

"Little earthworms? Really?" Humor brightened his voice.

Tomorrow shivered. "Disgusting and slimy. I want them all far away from me."

"There are no worms here, and no shadows," he soothed. "Only stars and beautiful treasures like you."

Curled up in his lap, Tomorrow *felt* like a treasure.

It occurred to her then that, despite her insistence that she was worth saving, she'd been pushing him away, not because she wanted to spare him the heartache—or not only for that. She'd allowed all the pitying looks and patronizing opinions to sway her over the last year. She'd let them make her think she was less of who she had been.

But she wasn't less. She was just sick. She was changed, and that wasn't the same thing as being less than. And if she wanted to love this man with her whole being for as long as she could, then she damn well deserved to.

Dark told her star stories, enfolding her in the comfort of his heat and the rumble of his sonorous voice. Some of the tales were humorous. Others were moving. Each of them filled a well in her heart.

"I was scared to walk amongst the stars before we met," she said, "but you make them seem so wonderful."

She felt the weight of his tears when they landed in her hair, and she found his hand under the blankets and held it. She moved over his lap as he gathered himself, feeling a different sort of stirring beneath the wool of his trousers.

"You should hold still," he warned playfully. His voice was thick, edged in grief and colored by longing.

"I don't want to," she confessed. Bringing her lips to his neck, she kissed him slowly, then spoke directly in his ear. "I want to make you feel good."

And she wanted to feel alive, not like a person hiding from death. She wanted to show him what she felt for him with more than her words. He inspired her passion, and she desperately wanted to continue to stoke his.

Tomorrow shifted her weight to straddle him, and she cupped the growing bulge, elated when his groan carried around the room.

"I want to see what you look like when you come," she said, and she felt his appreciative growl in a pulse between her thighs.

Tomorrow worked down the fall front of his trousers. He helped her with his drawers. She palmed his length, and the silken head grew damp in her hand. Wanting to see more of him, she unbuttoned his waistcoat and the shirt beneath, then she pushed them open.

Sensitive scales trailed down the valley of his abdomen, widening below his navel. She teased them with the pads of her fingers and watched as the skin around them pebbled with gooseflesh.

His cock was thick and heavy in her hands. She lowered to her knees between his legs and kissed the tip.

"Is there something I should know first before I get started?" she teased. "Will fire come out of you?"

His head went back, and he laughed raucously. "You're safe with me and all my dragon parts, Sunshine."

His tail followed her onto the floor, unfurling down her back, a hot comfort along her spine. When she took him in her mouth, his fingers laced through her hair. Soft and strong, his tail cupped her ass.

She worked her lips over his length, sucking him down. His tail curled under the hem of her shift, then beneath her drawers. She rose up higher onto her

knees as it glided between her legs.

“Moan around my cock for me,” he begged her.

She did, and his fingers tightened in her hair.

He was being gentle with her, letting her take and explore what she wanted. Her tongue swept around his tip and his hips rolled upward. With restraint, he settled back in the chair.

Tomorrow’s grunt of protest was lost around his cock. Encouraging him to move with her, she squeezed his thighs.

The heat and caress of his tail had her dripping. The movement of his cock in her mouth made her sigh. Tugging up the ends of her shift, she found the bud of nerves at the top of her sex, and she circled it with her thumb.

“Gods yes,” Dark grunted. “Find your release with your lips around my cock, and I’ll give you anything you want. Any treasure in my hoard—name it and it’s yours. You make me feel so good, Sunshine.”

“You,” she panted. “You’re the treasure I want.”

The end of his tail, damp with her pleasure, pressed against her entrance. She was so relaxed it slid into her with ease, pumping slow and shallow at first. She moaned her encouragement, rocking along with him.

Her stomach and thighs quivered. She sucked him deep, and then her eyes rolled back in her head. He fucked her with his tail hard. Her orgasm overtook her, pulling her under a wave of warm, blurry bliss that turned her bones into rubber.

Fingers woven in her hair, Dark gasped. “I’m done for, Sunshine,” he warned.

He said her name when he came.

Tomorrow swallowed down his salty release, thoroughly pleased with herself. Her fears, for the time being, long forgotten. Dark fell back against the cushions with a heaving exhale, and Tomorrow leaned against his lap, catching her breath. While he gently smoothed back her hair, calming the tangles he’d created with his enthusiasm, she peered out the window above her.

A distant constellation caught her eye, one he hadn’t told her about yet. She pointed it out, reaching high to circle the cluster with her finger against the window glass. The cluster of lights resembled a woman wearing a dress and carrying something on her shoulder.

"That one is called The Witch," he said, voice hoarse. Dark fastened his trousers and lifted her back into his lap.

"Ah. I like that one. I think it's my favorite." Then she scoffed at a memory, bundling herself up in the blankets. "I tried to become a witch. When the healers first told me of my fate, that was the first solution that came to mind. Trade a piece of my soul, make a connection to a familiar, and live."

Dark stiffened beneath her.

"But I didn't," she added quickly. "I know making deals for a familiar is rather taboo—"

"It's not in the mountains," he said gruffly. "Why didn't you complete the bargain?"

There was no joy in her laugh. "I'm barely immortal, Dark. And I'm sickly. Usually, a witch strengthens their familiar. According to the healers, my soul isn't worth enough for anyone to even consider tying themselves to me. I wasn't strong even before my illness, and I don't possess impressive magic."

"They're wrong about you," Dark rumbled.

"Is it arrogant if I agree with you? Is it arrogant if I think my soul is worth saving?"

He dropped another kiss in her hair. "Of course it's not arrogant. You are worthy."

"I did try," she continued. "I wasn't even picky. We don't have dragons up north, and demons are quite rare outside of the Hell mountains, but I offered it to the smaller tribes I could find, and the fairies who'd listen." She studied the bottom of his jaw. He was looking at the stars, but she sensed his mind was miles away from her now. "I hoped I'd get lucky. Demons don't have an afterlife. They're reborn in Hell fire. I hoped I'd find one desperate enough for a soul to cling to, but they weren't interested in what I have on offer."

Tomorrow had never shared the public's apprehension toward witches. The fairy stories that villainized them were more than a little far-fetched. She genuinely loved the idea of having a companion for life, with the added benefit of sharing the familiar's immunity to blood magic, but it wasn't in the cards for her. Her mind wandered. Cuddled in his lap, she felt warm and safe, and sleep beckoned.

“When you wake,” he said, running a hand down her arm, “I might not be here. I don’t want you to be frightened. I’m just visiting with someone.”

“Who?”

“My sister. I need to speak with her. Here in my hoard, you’re always close to me, so I’d like you to stay put. I’ll be right back, quick as can be. Perhaps you’ll even sleep right through my absence, but in case you don’t . . . don’t worry. I won’t be long.”

She nodded her head, concerned she’d said something about witches that she shouldn’t have. “I’ll be fine. I’ll have the girls for company, and you’re right—I’ll probably just sleep through.”

Chapter 12



Tomorrow

Tomorrow sensed it when Dark left his hoard. She tried to fall asleep again in the bed after that and couldn't. Outside the tower window, he'd kept the clouds at a dusky shade of purple, just enough light for her to see clearly but not enough to hurt her eyes. She padded over to the window to watch the inhabitants of the hoard wake.

The fairies played by the waterfall. They took turns riding on the back of a great tortoise. Amused by their energetic splashing, she tried to decipher their game. There was chasing involved, but a splash of water appeared to transform the individual from runner to seeker instead of tagging.

Wetness pooled under Tomorrow's nose. She swiped at it. It was bleeding again. It tended to do that when the air was dry and she was stressed. Plugging her nostrils, she searched for something to clean herself with.

Thankfully, the bleeding stopped quickly. She could find nothing in the tower that didn't seem far too precious to be used to wipe away the mess.

In the back of her mind, she thought about the witch's constellation. A sharp prick of pain stabbed between her ribs, and then it was gone. When she pulled her hand away, the blood in her palm had formed into a lumpy bit of rock the color of rust. A piece of her partially immortal soul, crafted by her will and longing to escape death.

Her fragmented soul hadn't been worth much to the fairies and demons in the villages up north. She thumbed the piece of stone, and although it looked brittle, it felt hard.

"You're fierce," she told the piece of soul. "We're worth something, even if they couldn't see it."

She didn't know what her new friends would say, but what harm could it possibly do to ask for help? With a drop of hope in her heart, she left the tower and made for the waterfall on legs that felt like sticks of butter gone much too soft.

The fairies didn't stop their game until she reached the edge of the lagoon.

"Rower," Ruby called brightly, and the girls began to chant her name.

"That's right. It's Rower," she said sheepishly, squeezing the ruddy stone in her palm. "I . . ." Her mouth had gone completely dry, and her toes dug into the moist mud. "I have something for one of you—that is, if you would consider bargaining with me. I am in need of a familiar willing to help preserve my life with their blood magic by soul-bonding with me. I'm quite ill."

Tomorrow sat at the edge of the pool, crossing her legs beneath her. Her shift was thin, but the air was as warm as dragon breath.

She licked her parched lips. "I'll just leave this here for you to consider." Hands shaking, she set the stone beside her in a patch of dry earth. "This and my friendship, my loyalty, are what I have to offer you in return."

As the fairies gathered around to examine it, Tomorrow lay on the grass, her body tired. More and more fairies came out from around the waterfall.

One by one, they studied the rusty piece of stone, passing it around.

And one by one, they went back to playing, letting it fall to the earth. The fairies babbled at her apologetically.

"I understand, of course," Tomorrow said softly. "It's all right. I'll be . . ."

Not fine. Her eyes welled until her vision blurred. She blinked up at the sky.

"I know what you're thinking," she whispered, voice breaking. "That I'm too weak to be tethered to, but I'm not unworthy. I'm *not*. Strength is more than muscles, and power is more than magic. Grace is more than an ability to dance well. Grace is kindness and gentleness, and I have those in abundance. If someone would just give me a chance, I could show you."

But she was so tired her eyelids grew heavy.

* * *

Dark

Before Dark left his hoard, he turned the knob until it clicked twice. It opened into a vast corridor dotted with decorative doorways. Glistening hardwood floors stretched before him endlessly: the hoards of his blood relatives.

Above each doorway hung a lantern, the lights of which either burned brightly or had been snuffed out—a sign of their passing.

Dark's heavy footsteps echoed as he cut a path to the entrance he wanted. It was a door made of dark wood, the frame covered in carvings of massive wildflowers, the leaves a barbaric swirl around the lintel. He knocked hard enough to rattle the wood, and then he waited briefly for a response. When none came, he pounded on it more forcefully.

"Sora!" he called. "I need to speak with you."

He heard shuffling inside, the click of claws against wood, but the movement was too small to be that of his sister's.

Finally, the door cracked open, and a small runt of a dragon stuck out her diamond-shaped head. Her liquid black eyes looked him over before she waddled aside. The door opened into a cozy living space dominated by a large hearth. It resembled the inside of a modest hut with shuttered windows and mahogany fixtures. The dragon, a familiar with black scales, hissed up at him. She stood no higher than a house cat, her head coming to his knees.

"I need to see her, Masha," he told the dragon as he carefully entered the hoard of Sora Yaga. The simple hut didn't feel like the magical sacred space of an Unseelie queen, but it was a dangerously deceptive hoard, more trap than treasure trove. The magic was so thick around him that the fine hairs on his arms and the back of his neck rose.

Masha flapped her leathery wings and made a sound like a great irritated bird. In unison, the fireplace hissed and a hot breeze blew through the room like a huff.

"It's important," Dark insisted. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't. Tell Sora I need her. Please."

A familiar could communicate with their witch through the link of their souls. While Dark waited, he examined the deceptively cozy space to see if anything had changed since he'd visited last. A round wax-wood table was

surrounded by chairs beside a counter littered with jars of cooking ingredients. The hut smelled of dried herbs and brimstone.

A folded bit of blue fabric sat on the table. That was new. He wouldn't dare go searching through his sister's drawers or cabinets, but he drew closer to the table without much worry. The hoard was aware of him and leery of intruders. He didn't want to get his arm bitten off by a piece of furniture, so he stayed on his feet and carefully unfolded the fabric, listening for signs that he'd angered the hoard.

Other than a low rumble coming from the hearth, which had started when he entered, the hoard made no complaint. Unfolding the last section of fabric revealed the trident emblem, a discarded attempt at embroidering the new Unseelie flag.

The front door opened, and his sister—tall and willowy—stepped through. Four short bone-colored horns sprouted from the crown of her head. She wore her golden hair loose down her back. Briefly, he caught sight of sunlight over a snow-covered mountain ridge before the door clapped shut.

"Brother," she greeted. Her hard mountain accent was thicker, more antiquated than his. "You look . . . alive enough."

Dark dropped the unfinished flag onto the table. He needed to ask his questions and get back to his mate, but he calmed himself. No one got anywhere making hasty demands of Sora.

"Alive, yes," he told her. Then he frowned at her feet peeking out from the bottom of her red velvet dress—a dress of many centuries past. Her toes were bare and snow-covered.

She trotted over to the hearth, allowing the heat from the fire to melt the slush off.

"Why don't you ever wear shoes?" His skin was as dragon-tough and resistant to the weather as hers, but that didn't mean he wanted muck between his toes.

Sora removed an apron from the hook by the hearth and pulled it over her dress—a queen in a maid's smock, a strange sight indeed. "I love my shoes. If you keep them on your feet, they wear out, so I don't wear them often."

"Fair enough." Dark tapped on the flag. "I didn't realize you'd designed the new emblem yourself."

“You know what they say.” Sora struggled to tie her apron in place. “If you want something done right, do it yourself.”

She summoned her familiar with a glance. Masha flew to her aid, using clawed fingers to tie the apron cord into a loose bow at her back. Bricks in the chimney rolled aside to reveal the kettle Sora had conjured. She hung it over the fire, then made herself comfortable in the nearby armchair. Masha curled up on a fur rug at her feet.

Dark fingered the detailed emblem. “Why a trident, I’ve always wondered?”

“A trident is three weapons in one. It represents the three powerful women who brought down the tyrant,” Sora said.

Masha lifted her head. Her forked tongue tasted the air.

“That’s right,” Sora said, responding to whatever thought her familiar had sent her. “You were one of those powerful women.”

Dark squinted at the piece. The decorative hilt of the third prong appeared to be covered in inky dragon scales like Masha’s. “You, the queen, are the larger, center-most blade, I assume?”

Sora shook her head. “I’m not represented in the trident at all.”

The hilt of the middle prong had long curved edges that reminded Dark of fairy talons. The first blade was flecked in green and gold like the ancient weapons favored by the elves. Immediately, Queen Rain and her fairy ward came to mind.

“Darko,” Sora said reproachfully, “tell me why you’re here.”

He hadn’t realized until that moment how strongly he’d been avoiding the subject. Immediately, the reminder put a rock in his throat. He pictured his mate hiding from shadows, curling up in the bed of a near stranger, hoping he was scary enough to keep death away for her.

His poor beloved . . .

The thought must have done something to him, something his sister read on his face. In the quiet, Sora’s expression softened, a look Dark was uncustomed to seeing on her. The kettle screeched. She retrieved it, carrying the steaming water to his side. The table had produced a tea set, cups, saucers, and a plate of cinnamon-scented biscuits. Sora folded up the flag and used it as a cozy to cushion the hot pot.

"I've been worried about you, brother," Sora confessed as she lowered herself into the chair opposite him.

He sat with a plop at the head of the table. He'd never felt so heavy before, like he had a boulder strapped to his chest and a mountain on his back.

"Worried about my usefulness, you mean," he grouched.

Sora poured hot water into two cups and prepared their tea, her face placid. "When you left for the Lunar Court, I was hopeful you'd finally find the solace you wanted, but you still appear to have one eye looking over your shoulder." She paused and her gaze met his. Hers was a deep and dark blue, as cold and vast as an ocean of glaciers.

Dark squinted at her. "You're not acting like yourself."

Sora snarled deep in her throat, displaying her sharp dragon teeth, looking more like the sister he remembered. "I have been spending too much time with Rain of House Night. The Seelie favor the hugs and the kisses. They are disgusting."

"I like the change," he insisted.

Her lips quirked, then her expression turned thoughtful. "Our father truly is dead, you know. I removed his head from his shoulders myself, and he isn't ever coming back. He won't be able to capture you and hold you against your will ever again. He won't ever be able to take anyone from you."

"I know that," Dark rumbled.

"I'm not certain you do."

A shiver went scating over his skin like thousands of spider legs skittering across his body all at once. He rubbed at his arms to calm the sensation. Perhaps she had a point. The damage their father had done went deep, but the ghost of the tyrant wasn't what haunted him now.

Dark worked his raw throat. "I'm in love."

Her golden brows lifted toward her hairline. "Truly?"

A flicker of a smile died on his lips. "Truly."

She peeked around him at the door by the hearth where he'd come through. "Why didn't you bring them with you, this person you love so? Is it the Seelie duchess Rain wrote to me about?"

"She's resting . . . She's dying." The words were acid in his mouth. The weight on his chest doubled, threatening to bowl him over.

Sora's face fell. Masha let out a sympathetic squawk from her fur rug.

"And you are hoping we could be of help, yes?" Sora stirred honey into her tea, clinking the small spoon against the ceramic.

"Tomorrow. That's her lovely name." Dark fingered the rim of his cup, resting his elbows on the tabletop. "She tried to become a witch, like you, to escape her fate. But she's only partially fae, and her soul has been weakened by a magical malady. Her nearest immortal relative is a grandmother."

Sora exhaled slowly. "Finding a familiar willing to give up the promise of power that makes that bargain attractive will be very, very difficult. How much time does she have?"

"I worry there isn't time to go searching properly, and my mate is kind. She wouldn't approve of me forcing someone to make the bargain," Dark said, "though the thought has entered my mind."

As had begging his fairies to save her. But he knew his girls well. Fairies had much in common with dragons. They understood beautiful things and valued what was precious and what made them stronger. They would not take on such a massive responsibility to help his mate and weaken themselves, and because they would not, he could grow to hate them.

When Tomorrow was gone—the thought made his stomach drop—his girls were all he'd have. Though some of them were older than him in years, they were still children by fairy standards. He didn't want to hate them.

But what if he had no other choice but to ask them? It felt like he had two mountains on his back now. He raised his cup to busy his hands. It seemed inevitable that he'd have to beg the fairies. It seemed inevitable that they would say no, Tomorrow would die, and he'd have no one. Just his sorrow and the trouble that clung to him.

Sora lifted her tea, letting the steam curl around her pale face. She drank a sip. "My little brother who still carries around the burden of the dead lost while under his command would not approve of forcing another into such service, I think. Darko, you wouldn't be able to live with yourself. Sometimes I worry you're barely living with yourself now. Do not mistake me," she added hurriedly when his hands clenched around his teacup. "I don't think this is a weakness on your part, as some dragons would. I believe your desire to stop the suffering of others makes you a beautiful person."

Taken aback, Dark set his tea down so hard it splashed over the rim of his cup. He had the strangest urge to hug his sister. Certain she'd bite him, he refrained from doing so.

"Ack," Sora said, frowning. "Would you just listen to me carrying on mawkishly. Rain's terrible influence again. She's like a tiny little disease, dangerously contagious. I'll never let her near me with her hugs ever again."

Despite the heat of her words, the hearth sighed contentedly behind him, giving away her deeper feelings.

Dark's next thought put him on edge. His feet shuffled against the floorboards, and his tail swiped at the air.

"I want to become her familiar instead," he said gruffly.

Masha squawked again, this time a warning cry.

"Oh, brother," Sora said forlornly, "you don't want to do that."

"I can save her life. She's my mate, and I love her. I'll do this for her—for us both."

"Brother, I'm not certain you can become a familiar. Your mother wasn't Unseelie. The completion of the bargain requires strong blood magic. My mother was a goddess, and I'm not certain even I could."

"I know I'm not the most gifted blood mage, but—"

"Darko," Sora said, her voice rising, "even if you could manage it, look at Masha."

He did what she asked, studying the small dragon. The familiar flapped her wings at him.

"Would you really want to return to a runt state," Sora said, "trapped that way for all eternity? Trapped in the same form father forced you into for those terrible centuries when he held you captive? You hated it then. I remember."

He brooded over his steaming cup. "Masha can change her shape."

"You wouldn't be able to," Sora cautioned. "Not tethered to a mostly mortal soul, not half Unseelie as you are. You would be like Masha is now. Always lesser than you should be. How would you love your woman then?"

Dark glowered down at the tabletop. "If it would save her life ..."

"But is that what she wants? You to be tethered to her, no longer as the man she loves but trapped as a tiny beast in the runt form you loathe? I grant Masha great power when I can. She uses my life force to change the way a trickster does,

and still she would rather things were different. She only agreed to become my familiar to preserve her own life. She never would have chosen this for herself otherwise.”

The familiar hissed, forked tongue swiping at the air.

Sora interpreted, “Masha wouldn’t choose this for anyone, she says. Even an enemy. If your mate loves you in return, she wouldn’t want this for you.” She took a biscuit off the plate, a round one sprinkled with sugar, and tossed it to her familiar.

Dark’s hands formed fists. His nails bit into his palms. “I can’t lose Tomorrow.”

Sora leaned across the table, eyes demanding, dragging his gaze up to meet her penetrating stare. “Do you realize, brother, that you’re making her death entirely about yourself right now?”

A muscle in his cheek jumped. His jaw set. He would never, *could* never be so selfish. He loved her, damn it all.

Smoke puffed from his nostrils, but then just as quickly as anger burned through him, ugly shame made itself known, cooling Dark’s insides. He blinked at his sister and found no sympathy in her stony expression.

He wanted to deny it, but the words turned to ash on his tongue.

Sora was right. He’d never been more selfish in his entire life. Tomorrow wouldn’t want any of this for him, for either of them. Stuck in his runt form forever and unable to hide how unhappy he was, he’d make them both miserable.

Tomorrow insisted he didn’t need redemption for all that he’d lost in the war. She’d hate that he was still using her to chase it. Trouble clung to him that he’d never be rid of.

All the lives he’d lost because of it . . .

The shock of his next realization was ice in his veins. By continuously seeking some penance he could never have, he’d made the death of everyone he’d loved entirely about himself. Not about missing them. Not about remembering them. Never about honoring who they’d been.

About himself and his pain and his need to be redeemed. And for what?

Dragons didn’t show each other raw emotion usually, but when his eyes stung, he was too ashamed of his own selfishness to fret over the tears threatening to spill.

Sora surprised him again. She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. Her touch was dragon-warm. "Darko, what you're enduring now is worse than any battle we've ever fought before. Worse than war. Worse than having a horrible tyrant for a father." She squeezed his fingers so hard it hurt. "You deserve to be a little selfish right now, brother. Just don't forget your lover completely in all this. You can't ignore what she wants in favor of what you want. You can't make this about you."

Dark rubbed at his forehead. "What she wants," he said contemplatively.

Sora released him, lifting her cup to her lips with both hands. She took a few swallows before returning it to its saucer. "If there is something I can do for you, something that your mate would like, then don't hesitate to ask. We will make whatever time she has very special, and there is hope still. I can reach out to the demon clans near Hell. You take care of her, and I'll send others to do the searching."

Dark tried to pick up his teacup, but his fingers were shaking. Under the table, his knee bobbed. "Tomorrow is sweet and sees the beauty even in ferocious things."

Sora gestured for him to continue. "We are all ears. Whatever your mate wants, I would see it granted."

"Dresses." His voice strained over the word. "I need more formal dresses. Ones perfect for dancing."

Her smile displayed all of her sharp teeth. "I have dresses. What else would your mate like?"

"A ring. An engagement ring so large and precious dragons would kill for it," he said, thinking of the way Tomorrow's face had brightened when she'd seen his favorite things. It was no surprise that the mate of a dragon would know how to appreciate beautiful treasures.

Sora chuckled, displaying her sharp teeth. "Consider it done. Anything else?"

"Revenge." Dark's lip curled. "I will help her get her revenge."

* * *

Tomorrow

Tomorrow awoke groggily in the grass beside the lagoon and the rushing waterfall. She hadn't meant to fall asleep there.

Eyes blurry, she rubbed dried blood off her face and from under her nostrils. She was starting to sit up to rinse her nose and mouth in the nearby waters when she felt a small weight on her abdomen and the gentle prick of fairy talons through the linen of her shift.

Ruby stood on her stomach, leathery bat wings flittering behind her, wispy red hair in a tiny knot on the very top of her head. Between her hands, she held the ruddy bit of Tomorrow's soul.

"Bibka," Ruby squeaked.

"Oh?" Tomorrow blinked at her. "I don't know what that means."

Showing off all her pearly needle-teeth in a wide smile, Ruby raised the rusty stone to her mouth. "Forta Rower."

"Gods above and below. Do you mean . . ." Tomorrow rasped, throat tightening. "But Ruby, the fairy healers from my home up north told me that if you make a bargain with me, you wouldn't be a trickster. I'd weaken your magic, and you'd be stuck in your form. You wouldn't be able to cast incredible spells. You wouldn't be able to control the minds of others or any of the other wondrous things powerful fairies can do."

Ruby frowned. "Bibka," she said sternly, and then she opened her mouth wide and shoved the piece of rock inside. She swallowed it like a snake would, gulping around the stone that bulged in her small throat. When it was down, plunking into her stomach like a rock hitting the surface of a pond, she belched.

Hope swelled, and a sob hitched Tomorrow's next breath. "My dear Ruby, on my life, for becoming my familiar and for sharing your life force with me, you'll have my friendship for as long as I live."

Ruby rubbed her round belly. "Forta bibka. Forta Rower."

The bargain magic settled around Tomorrow's ribs, squeezing out her next exhale. The pain from her broken piece of soul sharpened briefly, like a shard of glass had caught in her side. And then it was gone as though it'd never been there.

Tomorrow gave her familiar a watery smile. "Now we never have to say goodbye to each other."

Bibka, Ruby said, sending her the thought through the new link of their souls.

Ha. I assumed I'd be able to understand you now— Oh wait, Tomorrow thought. I can understand you. The word hadn't changed, but the meaning was clear as crystal.

Bibka. Family love.

I love you too, Ruby, she said.

Wings a buzzing blur, Ruby flew in, and Tomorrow winced, preparing for the fairy to give her a love bite. Ruby kissed the end of her nose instead.

Tomorrow relaxed, and already she felt her energy rising, strength seeping into her bones, tightening her muscles.

"That was lovely, Ruby," she said, feeling the phantom of the sweet kiss on her skin.

Then Ruby bit her lovingly on the cheek.

* * *

Dark

The walk along the corridor of Dark's ancestors felt longer than usual. His feet dragged, and the chest of presents he carried with him did little to raise his spirits. Although the gifts inside were precious treasures most dragons would be glad to add to their hoards, it wasn't the one thing he wanted most: a future with his mate.

He often wondered whether, when the end came for him, he'd go to the Night Mother or be given a dragon's fate, forced to join with the mountains.

Forced to stare up at the stars where Tomorrow walked, forever apart from him.

Dark entered his hoard, feeling like his heart had fallen into his boots. He dropped the chest beside the bureau in the tower and called up the stairs to see if Tomorrow was awake. When she didn't respond, he climbed the steps, his heart stuttering in his chest, nervous that something was wrong. The tower was much too quiet. He couldn't hear the steady sounds of her breathing.

His chest squeezed when he found the bed empty, the covers tousled.

Laughter carried to him from the meadow outside. He went to the window but couldn't see anything, just grass and flowers and an expansive pasture that stirred in a wind that wasn't actually a wind. It was his breath, magically shared with his sacred place.

Bebe rose from the meadow, flying low. Apparently, they were playing some sort of hide-and-seek game. Dark left the tower and joined the fairy's pursuit.

He stirred Brisket and Polly from the flowers they were hiding behind. They wore matching outfits made of daffodil petals.

Bebe went charging after them. "Bebebebebebebe!"

The girls flew off in a blur of wings.

"Tomorrow?" Dark called.

Laughter greeted him, but it sounded like it came from everywhere at once, echoing across the meadow. He trotted through taller grass.

Tomorrow appeared, Ruby just behind her. She sprinted past him in a whirl of white linen and ashen hair. Ruby's wings buzzed with effort. They disappeared again, nothing but shifting greenery giving their position away. The other fairies took to the air, shooting from their hiding places to pursue her.

"What are you doing?" He raced after them, but she was so fast, he couldn't keep up.

Tomorrow threw her hands into the air like she could take off and fly with them.

"I'm a witch!" she shouted moments before she tripped and fell and disappeared below the high grass. Laughter bellowed out from the place where she'd vanished. Fairies hovered over her, chittering.

Dark's feet caught in the undergrowth, staggering to a halt. Had he heard her correctly?

Tomorrow leapt up and ran some more. She spun on her heels, and dozens of fairies came with her in a wave, their collective wings humming.

Dark blinked at her, arms inert at his sides. "What'd you just say?"

When she reached him, she threw herself at him, alighting like a bird landing on a perch, latching on to his body with a vigor he'd never seen in her before. She glowed. Her cheeks were a healthy pink, her freckles sun-bronzed.

"What's this?" Dark said, a chortle knocked from him. He hoisted her higher in his arms.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and smiled at him. She didn't just glow, she radiated brightness from the inside out, exuding her inner star fire.

"Rower bibka," Ruby jabbered, coming to land on his shoulder.

The scent of fairy blood magic, like overly ripe fruit, filled his nostrils. Tomorrow was covered in it.

"I'm a witch, Dark," she said again. "Ruby saved me with her immunity."

Grasping at hope, Dark's arms tightened around her, a reflex. His mind had slowed down, processing the information in bits and pieces.

Finally, it sunk in, and his heart swelled behind the cage of his ribs, two sizes too big. Large enough to leave a pleasant ache there. The emotion filling his chest was so all-consuming, his body felt too small to contain it. He nearly burst into his dragon form. His arms shivered, resisting the urge to elongate and break out in plated scales.

Tomorrow detached herself from him, dropping to her feet. "I feel good again, Dark," she said. "Strong and fast. My feet still get tangled, but I feel like I could run for ages. Like I could even pick *you* up, as big as you are, and lift you over my head!"

Tomorrow encircled his middle with her slender arms to demonstrate. Her grip formed a vice, and she strained under him.

Dark laughed at her effort, joy making him feel so light he was surprised she couldn't move him at all.

"Holy gods, you're still heavier than a full-grown tiger. All right. Maybe I can't lift you over my head," she said, relenting. "But I feel *good*. I feel alive. Even if I'm not strong enough to move you."

"You're strong enough to laugh when you fall and strong enough to get back up again. That's what truly makes you fierce, my little cabbage." Dark held her face in his hands, staring into her copper eyes, afraid the moment would flee too quickly.

The silly name made her giggle. He lowered his horns, brushing them over the top of her crown, sharing the overflow of love and deference that pumped blissfully through him.

"There's something I need to do," he told her, voice low.

"What's that?" she whispered.

“You’re probably tired of seeing beds right now, but that’s where I intend to take you.”

Chapter 13



Dark

Tomorrow sat on the edge of Dark's fourposter in the Gilded Boot. They'd shared the wonderful news with Margot and Susan immediately. Now the courtesans were upstairs awaiting the arrival of the physician.

Tomorrow frowned at him. "When you said you intended to take me to bed, this is *not* what I thought you meant."

Dark arched a brow at her. "I need to be certain. Your wellbeing is not an issue I take lightly."

Wings buzzing, Ruby floated near his head. She stuck her lip out at him in a pout before twisting to give him the cold shoulder.

Dark pointed his thumb at the fairy. "What's she cross about?"

Tomorrow folded her arms in shared defiance. "Ruby is upset, and reasonably so, because you don't believe she's given me her immunity to blood magic."

"I *do* believe it," Dark insisted. "I just need to hear the all-clear from the physician's lips. For peace of mind and nothing more. You've done fantastically, Ruby. I'm very proud."

Tomorrow rolled her eyes at him. Ruby blew a wet raspberry at the side of his face.

With the heel of his hand, Dark wiped fairy spittle from his jaw. "I think I know what will help. Love bite?" he suggested, holding up a finger.

Ruby beamed at him. Mouth open wide, she bared her needly teeth.

"Ah," Dark warned, "no blood, please."

Ruby bit down on the pad of his finger. Sharp pain pricked through the digit. She left teeth marks in the callus there but drew no blood as requested. He

sucked in a breath, shaking out the sting of it.

Her smile was smug as she glided over to her mistress to sit cross-legged beside her. Dark doubted there was much love in that bite, but it had served its purpose.

Dr. Bandile was as prompt as before. Susan and Margot escorted him into the room, then hung by the door, as eager to hear more good news as he was.

“A fairy child,” the physician cooed.

Ruby preened under his attention. Dr. Bandile set down his leather bag and opened the lip. She flew over to peruse the tools inside, chirruping at him.

“Does she like sweets?” he asked.

Dark shook his head. “Not unless your sweets are covered in frogs. Or blood.”

Dr. Bandile cringed.

Ruby dove into his bag, emerging moments later holding a metal tube that she clanked against a syringe. She paused, peering at her mistress as though they were sharing words with their eyes. The fairy’s next attempt at playing was gentler—and less likely to shatter the kind doctor’s equipment.

Tomorrow smiled at her familiar approvingly.

Dr. Bandile pulled out his stethoscope and took his time listening to her heart and lungs, his expression pensive.

Dark had been certain he was confident in his mate’s wellness, but the seconds stretched on for tiny eternities. The longer the thorough doctor took to examine his mate, the higher his worry mounted.

Susan and Margot held hands by the door. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one feeling distressed by the quiet.

Dr. Bandile stood finally, draping his stethoscope around his neck. “I’d still like to complete the rest of my examination,” he said, and his lips quirked, “but it’s a miracle. Truly.”

Margot and Susan let out a little cheer, and Dark’s chest compressed.

“Told you so,” Tomorrow said, and her grin was self-righteous.

“It’s like you’ve got someone else’s heart and lungs in your body now,” Dr. Bandile said.

Margot and Susan showered Tomorrow in hugs, ruffling her white hair and squeezing her to their chests. Dark’s emotions were once again too large for his

form.

Ruby had tired of the shiny new toys in the physician's bag. She was up to mischief now, looking for things to chomp on. Dark tutted at her when she tried to fit one of the metal buckles into her mouth.

"I'll take her back," he told Tomorrow, eager for a large, safe place that could comfortably hold all of him.

* * *

Tomorrow

The good-natured physician finished his examination, reassuring her she wouldn't need to see him, or others like him, anytime soon. Tomorrow hugged him so tight around the neck, he coughed.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, releasing him.

"No apologies necessary, Miss Easton," Dr. Bandile said kindly.

She got out the rest of her hugging on Susan and Margot, who were happy to be squeezed. It was strange, having to be careful not to hurt their mortal bodies, because some of her strength had returned to her. She'd never win a fight against a full-blooded immortal, of course, but that didn't make her feel less powerful.

When the bedroom cleared out, the closet door cracked open, letting in dusky magical light. The smell of brimstone had become pleasant to her now, a homey scent. She padded into the meadow, closing the door securely behind her.

Tomorrow turned and gasped.

She'd expected to find Dark, but not like this. He was a dragon, bigger than the astronomy tower and so long he wrapped comfortably around it like a great serpent, his heavy black plates shot through with gold.

Dark lifted a bulky head that was larger than she was. His smile was full of broadswords. Long black horns curled back from his crown. His wings were thick, bat-like, tar-colored monstrosities.

"Mate of my heart," he said, and his voice was so big the ground tremored, "don't be frightened."

"Divine Day's blazing beard," she gasped, laying a hand over her heart. "Why would I be frightened. You're . . . magnificent. Gods above and below, I could get

used to being called the mate of your heart in that powerful voice of yours.”

His laughter curled around her, vibrating under her feet. He lowered his head, and his breath heated her skin. She felt like she was seated near a hearth. She reached for him and laid her hand on his snout. The leather of his scales was tantalizingly hot.

She saw them then, stretched out along his back and between his wings, basking in his heat: dozens of tiny fairies.

Dark turned his great head to follow her eyes. His wings twitched, careful not to disturb the girls. “They prefer me in this form.”

“I can see why,” she said.

He nuzzled her. Very gently. She ran her hands along his scales, even dared to touch one of his ferocious teeth. He held still for her, allowing her exploration. He felt soft and dry, like oiled leather. And when he moved, coiled muscles hardened to steel beneath the plates.

Tomorrow’s stomach growled fiercely. “Oh my.” She pressed her hands over it.

“What’s wrong?” Dark rose to his feet—he had six of them now—so suddenly he sent the fairies into the air and nearly knocked his tower over. “Should I call the doctor?”

“No, no.” Her stomach hurt, it was so empty. It had been ages since she’d eaten well. She’d been too ill to consume much food.

“Tomorrow!”

“Don’t you dare summon that poor doctor! I just realized how hungry I am, is all.”

Dark’s relieved laugh nearly blew her over.

Much to Tomorrow’s great disappointment, Dark had to change into his two-legged form to fetch their dinner.

When he returned to the tower, he had enough food to feed an army of elephants. He spread the platters around the first floor. Plates sat on the bureau and armchairs, balancing atop chests. Tomorrow and Dark perched on pillows on the trident rug.

She surprised herself by eating most of everything, her portion and half of his. Beetroot soup and stuffed cabbage, and thick bread that she softened with hot butter. It crunched when she chewed it. They drank tea—with a reasonable

amount of honey because Tomorrow had learned her lesson and wouldn't let him prepare it.

Tomorrow lay in the meadow afterward, overly full, watching the stars. Swaying blades of grass tickled her bare arms and legs. The scent of wildflowers and overly ripe citrus—the pleasing smell of her familiar—filled her nose. Dark leaned in the doorway of his tower, peering at her, the hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth.

Ruby jabbered happily about her fairy friends.

You can go to them, Tomorrow told her. *We never need to say goodbye now because a piece of us is always together. That doesn't mean you can't visit with the rest of your bibka as often as you like.*

Ruby gave her cheek a love bite that smarted fiercely. Then she zipped off, a blur of black wings, toward the waterfall.

The weight of Dark's eyes put a flutter in Tomorrow's belly. Glancing at him silhouetted in the doorway of the tower, she wondered if she'd just stolen a glimpse of her forever. The hope in his midnight eyes was so bright, it was impossible to look anywhere else.

Dark crooked a finger at her and disappeared inside.

Tomorrow glided to her feet. Her steps were silent across the pasture. When she entered, she found him at the top of the stairs, hovering there. Sans his waistcoat, he was temptation incarnate.

He untucked his shirt and started on the buttons, and Tomorrow swallowed, her mouth suddenly parched. When his shirt was open, exposing his smooth chest and the familiar trail of scales down his stomach, he moved out of sight.

Every stair brought her closer to him, and each step released more and more butterflies inside her belly.

"Getting ready for bed so soon?" she teased.

"It sounded like a good idea. Would you like to join me?"

"Always," she purred.

"Always it'll be, then," he said. He shouldered out of his shirt, worked down his trousers and drawers, and crawled under the silk sheets.

Tomorrow dropped her underthings and left them on the ground as she crossed the room. Climbing in beside him, she pulled her shift off over her head,

then shook her short hair loose. The linen swooped toward the floor, as light as spider silk.

Over the sheets, she straddled his waist, sitting back on her knees. His tail made itself known, stirring under the bedding, rising like the fin of a shark cutting through water.

Cool air raised gooseflesh across her skin, and her bare nipples hardened, drawing his eyes.

Her fingertips were light, skimming along the plane of his chest. "What does a dragon crave the very most from his mate?"

"Dragons are hard beings," he confessed. "They spend most of their lives fighting for dominance. Everything is a battle; the war never stops. But I don't want what other dragons want."

Tomorrow found his nipple and circled it. "Then what does my dragon want? Tell me, and I'll give it to you."

"Tenderness," he said, and his voice broke on the word.

She moved her fingers in sweet circles along the sides of his temples. "My perfect prince," she said softly. "I will gladly give you tenderness."

She started at the tips of his horns, stroking along the ribbed scales. She ran her fingers through his hair, pushing the bronze strands off his brow. She traced a line down the bridge of his nose, and his eyes closed. Tomorrow trailed honeyed touches over his cheeks and down his throat. She explored the dips and valleys of his hard body. She circled the scales on his chest and stomach, luxuriating in the pleasure-filled little breaths that puffed out of him like small prayers.

"You deserve tenderness," she told him. "I'll show you all that I've got and more."

Dark gripped her thighs as she continued her sensual massage until she'd touched every last part of him. When she tried to caress his tail, it grabbed her, wrapping her wrist, then her arm. Around her back, then across her bottom.

She sniggered when she tried to pet the great length and it went around her face briefly. Tomorrow kissed his scales, and the coiled muscles released her.

Dark's laugh shook the bed. "It's a reflex."

"I love it," she said, pulling the bedsheets farther down.

She repositioned herself over his hips. He was hot and hard, and she was beyond ready for him. Hands resting low on his chest, she sunk down, taking him deep. His head and horns went back against the pillows. As she found her rhythm, he stroked her breasts.

Resting a palm over his heart for balance, she cupped the top of her sex. Dark's groan made her pulse surge. He bucked his hips so hard her small breasts bounced. Holding her by her waist while she pleasured herself, he drove up into her, deep thrusts that knocked desperate gasps out of her and made her toes curl into the bedding.

She rode him until mewls and moans turned into cries and pleas.

"That's right. Louder for me, Sunshine," he begged, and she obeyed.

She shouted his name. Called him her prince. Promised him tenderness until the end of time. Told him he fucked like he was made by the divines to do nothing else. And when he roared with his release, the pulse of his cock inside her pushed her over her peak.

She fell headfirst into a pleasure so vast she thought for a moment she'd floated off the bed. Collapsing over him, her sensitive breasts pillowed against his hot chest.

Still panting, Dark pulled the covers over them both. Pressed together, their heartbeats slowed into a matching rhythm, and they slept.

* * *

It was hard to tell time in the hoard. Tomorrow awoke hungry at what she hoped was close to breakfast. She reached beside her in the bed, stroking Dark's muscled arm. He was deep asleep.

Not wanting to disturb him, she untangled herself from his tail with great difficulty. The supple thing could be quite stubborn. Then she pulled on her shift, found her drawers, and made for the bottom of the tower.

When she reached the door, it was locked.

"Well, drat." Rolling her eyes, she stomped back upstairs.

Dark must have heard her. He was sitting up now, scratching his chest. "Do you need something?"

“Breakfast and a change of clothes,” she said, waving down the tower steps. “If you’ll give it your permission to open, or whatever it is you do, I’ll have at it.”

A snarl reverberated low in his throat.

Tomorrow frowned. “Did you just growl at me, dragon man?”

Dark frowned right back and forcefully patted the empty space beside him. “I’ll get you whatever you need. Come back to bed.”

Tomorrow folded her arms over her chest. “Dark, you may not hoard me without my permission. I forbid it. Open the door.”

He stared at her like he was considering her words. While the staring competition carried on, she tapped her foot at him impatiently.

“Is this new possessiveness because we made love?” she guessed.

His returning smirk was wistful. “There’s nothing new about my possessiveness. I don’t enjoy letting things I cherish out of my hoard. You know that.”

“Better get over the impulse,” she grumped. “That is, if you want to make love more often.”

His eyes narrowed. “No.”

“No?” she scoffed. “Dark, I’m being quite serious here!”

He shook his head. “No. If I get my hands on you, I can change your mind.”

Tomorrow spluttered. Considering his naked, well-muscled glory, she decided he might be right.

“Fine then.” She jabbed a finger at his beloved telescope. “Let me out, or I’ll turn all the knobs. I bet it took ages to get everything right where you want them for the lenses. For good measure, I’ll push it down the stairs afterward.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” he groused.

Lips pursed, she marched defiantly toward his telescope.

He erupted from the bed. Tomorrow let out a delighted shriek and shot down the stairs. On the first floor, she stepped in a plate of old food. It slowed her down, and he caught up to her.

Dark was right.

The moment he got his hands all over her, she changed her mind.

* * *

They lay tangled on the rug afterward. Tomorrow's body ached pleasantly. They'd made a spectacular mess, bits of food knocked from plates, and her clothing everywhere.

"Well, now I desperately need a bath," she told him. Focusing hard, she scrunched up her features.

"What are you doing now?" he asked suspiciously.

"Trying not to be adorable so you'll let me leave when I want— Oh! I know. I'll fart. There's nothing more crass and impolite than that. You couldn't possibly find me hoard-able then."

Dark snorted.

"I mean it," she said. "I'll do it!" After a moment of steady concentration, she added. "Well, I can't do it on command. But I think I can work up to one."

Dark's booming laugh shook through her body. The gleeful sound made her heart squeeze. And this time, it wasn't his touches that changed her mind. It was the words he whispered in her ear. He promised her a bath in a copper tub. A feast fit for a queen. Treasures and dresses and dancing the night away and all manner of beautiful things, if only she'd stay put just a little while longer. He had plans to get her revenge and to see her treated as a proper duchess.

And it was no wonder that revenge no longer sounded so sweet. Certainly, she'd see to her inheritance and her gran's orchards, but vengeance had no draw for her anymore. It was nothing compared to the motivation of her heart, the desire to be near her duke, to be showered in his laughter and his heat. To feel that brave and brazen spirit he incited in her after struggling so long with her fears.

"Ruby will know when she can open the door. You need blood magic and my permission to turn the knob. I'll let you out soon," Dark vowed.

"You had better," she said, rubbing her nose tenderly against his. He'd buttered her up so well she spoke the threat with all the malice of a fruit pie.

Chapter 14



Tomorrow

Sitting by the waterfall, Ruby offered her frog legs for a snack. Tomorrow put a hand over her stomach to settle it. *No thank you, sweetheart. I don't like it when my food is still moving around.*

Shortly after the fairy finished her meal of amphibians, she announced that they could leave. Her blood magic senses had picked up that the door was ready to open. Tomorrow carried her to the tower on her shoulder. The fairy turned the knob easily. It took a moment for Tomorrow's eyes to adjust to the change in light, and then the door magically snapped shut behind her, letting off the scent of brimstone.

A copper tub sat in the center of their bedroom at the Gilded Boot, surrounded by candles and carts of food and thick woven towels. The claw-footed monstrosity was so big she wondered how Dark had gotten it inside the room.

The duke had left hours earlier with a chest in his arms and a secret smile on his face. That chest was now sitting front and center, a few feet from the tub, flanked by Susan and Margot.

"Your man's got plans for you, love," Margot said with a suggestive wink. "We're to help you dress for the winter ball at court this evening, and then we're to escort you there, in luxury. The duke's orders. Not that anyone's got to tell us to do anything in high fashion. That's all we ever do."

"We've got high fashion coming out of our ears." Susan kicked the chest gently. "Darko said not to open it. He wanted you to be the first to see inside."

Tomorrow sniggered. "You opened it, didn't you?"

“Only the second he closed the door,” Margot scoffed. “Silly man. It’s like he doesn’t know us at all.”

“But you’re going to love it,” Susan added warmly.

The eager flutter of Ruby’s wings tickled her ear. Curls of steam rolled invitingly off the water in the tub. She could smell the bread and fruit and the sweet scent of puff pastries, and her mouth watered—but the promise of a surprise was too difficult to resist, despite the demands of her stomach. She dropped to her knees before the chest, threw open the brass latches, and lifted the lid.

“Gods above and below,” she gasped.

The rich fabrics inside, each wrapped neatly in silks that were gossamer thin, were food for the eyes as well as her soul. The beadwork alone on some of the gowns was so intricate it had probably cost a poor seamstress her sight. The colors were vibrant shades of dark purples and blues, rosy pinks, and greens. They glimmered like starlight. She buried her hands inside and found tulle and taffeta, silks and satin, and a velvet so rich she couldn’t stop running her fingers over it.

“There’s so many of them!” Tomorrow said. It occurred to her that, with Margot’s help, it wouldn’t be hard to cut one down into a small frock. “Would you like to wear one too, Ruby?”

Ruby dove into the chest, rubbing her round cheeks against the fabrics she liked best. She blew a raspberry at the purple ones. That was apparently not her shade.

They laid out the gowns over the bed while Ruby made her selection. Tomorrow grazed on the food. Tart berries burst in her mouth. The puff pastries were warm on her tongue and full of a satiny cream that was so sweet, her eyes rolled back in her head. Lifting a silver cloche, she found bacon and peppered sausages, hard-boiled eggs, and a loaf of dark Lunar bread full of nuts and sprinkled in cinnamon.

Ruby picked an off-white dress with pearl-encrusted ribbing. And then the scent of citrus burned in Tomorrow’s nose, and the gown shrank before her eyes.

“Well, would you look at that,” Margot said. “That’s certainly a useful trick.”

Apparently, Ruby wasn’t entirely without fairy magic, even tethered to a weaker soul. It occurred to Tomorrow that, if that was the case, Ruby must have

once had potential for seriously powerful spells. Poor Ruby. What if she wished to change her form or shape one day, but because of their bargain she was stuck forever as she was?

Tomorrow hadn't meant to, but she'd sent some of her worries to the fairy. New dress squeezed between her tiny, clawed fingers, Ruby informed Tomorrow in jabbers and chirrup that she was perfect exactly the way she was already.

Why would she ever want to change herself?

Laughter bubbled out of Tomorrow. *You're absolutely right, Ruby. You're perfect the way you are.*

* * *

Just after evening twilight, Tomorrow and her fabulous entourage arrived at the House of Night in high fashion, in a well-sprung coach and four, the cabin layered in thick furs. Footmen opened the cabin door for them and rolled out one of the rugs, protecting their shoes from the snow.

The scent of incense—moon magic—carried on the air. Blue mage lights burned in floating lanterns. They hung over the steps, guiding guests into a ballroom. Paper and silk butterflies and vibrant fae flowers decorated the tables. Magic animated the butterflies so they occasionally fluttered their parchment wings. The band was twice the size of the one that had performed at the feast. They warmed up on a low stage.

Ruby buzzed excitedly from her shoulder-perch. Tomorrow had chosen a dress to match her familiar's, dotted in pearls and cream in color. It hugged her slender body and flared from her hips into a bell shape that skimmed just above her leather slippers. Mother-of-pearl was pinned in her hair and dangled from her ears. The matching necklace had been wound thrice around Ruby's neck.

Even with so many eyes on her, she'd been so well pampered that she felt like a duchess—not someone's bastard or an imposter.

The dance floor gleamed. The chandeliers had been fitted with blue and purple candles. Another strong smell of incense permeated the room, a spell to make it appear like it was snowing inside. Tomorrow held out her hand, and a bright bit of light illusion burst against her gloved palm.

"Beautiful," she whispered.

"The King of Night knows how to throw a party," Margot said. "Though I don't see him or our queen anywhere. No surprise there, though. Rain would rather storm a castle and battle a dragon than face a crowd. I bet they've found a nook to hide in."

"Tomorrow," Susan asked, her tone dreamy as her gaze found a spot across the ballroom and fixed itself there, "would you mind terribly if Margot and I attended to some work matters while we're here?"

"Not at all." Tomorrow craned her neck, trying to see where the madam was staring.

"We do hate to leave you alone," Susan fretted.

Tomorrow gestured to Ruby perched on her shoulder, wearing her fine dress like she was made for it. She'd even painted the ends of her talons a pearlescent shade.

"I'm never alone," Tomorrow said fondly.

Ruby primped her ginger hair.

"Susie has some *romancing* to do," Margot confided, waggling her brows.

A quick splash of color stained the madam's cheeks. She batted a hand bashfully at her partner. "Oh, stop."

Margot sniggered.

"*Romance*? Not just a good time?" Tomorrow pressed.

Susan gestured at the mortal lord across the way, a tall figure who stood near the punch bowls. "See the fella over there with the impressive mustache?"

"I do!" Tomorrow recalled briefly meeting that same dandy lord during the feast days ago.

"He comes into The Boot every once in a while. He orders the same bland drink and tips large, but he hasn't quite mustered up the courage to ask for company." Susan sighed distractedly. "He's got deep pockets, and he's shy. I just love it when they're shy."

Margot snorted. "I just love the deep pockets—and when they have long legs, and they're strong enough to spin me around like a top."

Tomorrow chuckled until she had a stitch in her side. Ruby chattered in her ear. She wanted to know what the courtesan meant by that. Ruby was older than Tomorrow but still a child by fairy standards. Perhaps they should be more careful about what they said around her.

I'll try to explain later, Tomorrow thought through the link of their souls. Ruby seemed appeased by that.

"I'm going in," Susan said. She pinched her cheeks, drawing more color out of them. "How's my face?"

"Perfect as a porcelain doll," Margot insisted. "Go on then. I'm right behind you."

Susan took the lead. Grinning over her shoulder, Margot gave her partner's behind an encouraging pat that had them both giggling as they wove their way through the crowd.

Tomorrow tried to watch their conquest from across the ballroom, but the music grew louder and guests began to pair off. It was difficult to watch them through all the dancers. Tomorrow's short stature didn't help matters.

When the music changed, footmen stationed around the room opened straw baskets and large blue Lunar butterflies jetted toward the ceiling. They floated around the chandeliers, drawing a collective gasp from the guests below, turning the ballroom as picturesque as a child's fairy story.

Oooooooo, Ruby cooed to her through the link. *Is issa uggs!*

"You can go fly with the bugs," she told Ruby. "I don't mind. Really," she added when the fairy hesitated. "Darko will be here any minute. I'm sure of it. Go on, you."

Ruby dove off her shoulder, weaving between the lights, chasing the butterflies that were as big as sparrows.

"Oh dear," Tomorrow said when Ruby caught hold of one and immediately shoved it in her mouth, chomping loudly.

She glanced about, checking for outrage, but no one seemed very upset.

Just a *little* upset.

She caught only a few disgruntled looks, but since the other guests got to feast and enjoy themselves in their way, Tomorrow felt Ruby should be allowed the space to do the same. And if they didn't like it, perhaps she'd casually mention to any who protested that her mate was a cranky dragon capable of eating everyone that crossed her. She grinned at the thought.

The next song was upbeat, and more dancers took to the floor.

"Cousin." Lord Glen Freest's syrupy voice startled her.

He pulled her into a turn. He was strong, and when she tried to pull away, he held her hand so tight it ached.

"I'm not dancing with you," she spat.

"Sure you are," he said drolly, spinning them away from the crowd, toward the corner of the ballroom. "It's time we put this ugly business behind us."

"You mean the ugly business of *murdering* me?" She tried to stomp on his foot.

He dodged her heel. "Quite right. You nearly had me stumped with this proprietary clause, but I've figured it out yet again."

"Gods, your ego—it's astronomical. You don't deserve everything, Glen, just because you want it."

Glen's placid expression cracked. Rage simmered in his indigo eyes. "I'll not be just someone's second son a moment longer. Don't you dare speak to me about what it is I deserve."

"What you deserve is a noose around your neck," she hissed. "My mate will be here any minute and—"

"No," he said icily, "he won't be anywhere any minute."

"He *will*," she growled. The threat in his words was not lost on her. Her stomach plummeted. Wasn't Dark supposed to be here already? Quickly she scanned the archway, searching for her duke, desperately hoping he'd appear.

Dark wasn't there.

But Tomorrow refused to let fear grip her. "He's coming for me. And this time when he wants to rip you apart, I'm going to let him!"

Tomorrow dug her heel into the top of his foot. He ground his teeth at her but didn't let her go. Tightening his hold on her back, he turned her roughly.

"You're hurting me," she spat.

"Good."

Wrath rattled through her. "If you don't unhand me now, I'll scream, and then I'll grab a fork from one of those tables and have a go at your eyes like Margot suggested."

Glen released her, sending her reeling. She stumbled into two footmen who lined the wall, waiting to assist guests.

"Pardon me," Tomorrow said. Then she sent her thoughts to her familiar. *Ruby, would you like to bite someone for me?*

Nom, nom, nommies, Ruby hissed excitedly, but Tomorrow couldn't see where she'd gone. They were separated by so many people. She could sense her, could feel her energy radiating from somewhere in the ballroom, but—

"It's all right," the first footman said politely. He was a Lunar fae with familiar blue skin.

The second held her arm to help steady her. He was a mortal and just as familiar. His grip tightened. Seconds too late, she remembered the scoundrels from the alleyway outside The Boot. They boxed her into the corner, preventing her retreat.

"Fuck," Tomorrow breathed, just as a canvas bag that smelled like dirt and old potatoes came down over her head.

Ruby, help! Get Dark!

"Sleep," a rough voice hissed.

The cloying scent of moon magic filtered in under the canvas sack, and darkness took her.

* * *

Dark

Just before sunset, under a dusky sky, the duke waited inside a hackney on the corner of Dimmet Street, in front of a pawnshop that belonged to the notorious Bargainer. Dark held a card in his hand, checking the address. He was definitely in the right place, but to his surprise, no one was inside. Not a single candle or gaslight flickered through the broad windows.

Lord Jonas Moen rounded the corner moments later, breath misting in the winter air, followed at his heels by a fuzzy white cat that looked more like a cloud with legs than a feline. A top hat sat askew on his head, pushed to one side by his bracketed horns.

Dark climbed out of the hackney to greet them.

"Apologies, Your Grace," Jonas said. "My employee Leif was supposed to see you in before I arrived."

"Is he usually so dependable?" Dark asked sarcastically.

“Leif’s loyalties are to coin.” Jonas fished a brass key out of his pocket and unlocked the door to the small shop. “Coin is something I have in abundance, so yes, he’s usually much more dependable. I hope nothing’s gone awry with him, or I might have to feel bad when I reprimand him.”

The shop was stuffed full of shelving, but the displays were tidy and bedecked in treasures. Like a fae version of a hoard.

Jonas took off his hat, hanging it on a hook by the door. He rubbed his arms over his coat sleeves to warm them. “I’ll get the stove on.”

Dark’s horns and tail were still steaming. “I’m fine, and I am in a bit of a hurry.”

“Based on your finery, I’d wager you’re headed to the winter ball. One moment.” Jonas vanished briefly behind a counter. The sound of a small metal door clanging followed, and the scent of kerosene wafted by. “That’s better. Right then. Your message mentioned you had two precious items you wished to hock in exchange for . . . ?”

“I’d like you to help me secure a number of orchards up north in the Seelie provinces. It’s also my understanding that you own a ripe property just outside Whiteholm. It’s known for its fruit trees and a newly furnished country manor with elegant sitting rooms. There are several of them, I’m told.”

Jonas scoffed. He removed his top hat and smoothed his mahogany hair around his horns. “Your items would have to be precious indeed. Where are they? Surely something so valuable wouldn’t simply fit in your coat?”

The fuzzy cat jumped onto the counter beside her owner. She meowed for attention, which the Bargainer immediately gave to her. The front windows let in a great deal of fading sunlight.

Dark frowned, feeling exposed. “What’s in that back room there?”

“Storage,” Jonas said.

“Close the curtains,” Dark insisted.

While Jonas was busy covering the windows, the cat assisted him, climbing the curtains he was trying to shut.

Dark twisted the knob on the door to the storage room and opened it to his hoard. At his command, his treasures were there, ready for him. He dragged the Hell tree inside the pawnshop, his golden telescope next. Then he shut the door quickly.

“Good gods, man!” Jonas said, and his jaw went slack. “Are those blimming diamonds?” Rounding the counter, he reached for the tree.

Dark snarled at him, and the Bargainer’s hand snapped back. “You and your cat may not touch my things.”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “I need to at least be allowed to look at them. The gems could be convincing replicas.”

“Look with your *eyes*, then,” Dark grumped.

Jonas pulled a small, layered monocle from his pocket. “If I get closer, are you going to bite my head off?”

“Just keep your hands and your cat to yourself and you can inspect them all you need to.”

The cat was still busy with the curtains, flexing her claws in the fabric.

Jonas bent at the waist and examined one of the larger glittering gems on the Hell tree. He whistled through his teeth appreciatively. “How many more will grow?”

“As long as no one picks one, it will continue to grow and produce more wealth indefinitely.”

“Fascinating.” Jonas tucked away the special monocle in the breast pocket of his jacket. Then he took his time studying the golden telescope. His fingers flexed like he wanted to reach for the knobs, and Dark sent him another warning snarl.

“Well, I’ll need to think about all this,” the Bargainer said, stroking his angular chin.

Dark snorted. “Don’t play with me. You want them both.”

Jonas smirked over his shoulder. “I confess, I haven’t done as good a job as I usually do in feigning disinterest. You caught me off-guard with these two beauties. It’s not every day you see anything like them. But properties up north are expensive, and I just finished building the house you’ve now got your eye on. It was supposed to be my daughter’s one day.”

“It’s a fucking diamond tree,” Dark said.

Jonas exhaled through his nose. “It most certainly is.”

“And you want it.”

“Gods, do I ever.” He glanced at it, and his eyes went shiny and round.

“You could buy your daughter two new houses with something like that.”

“Three,” Jonas agreed, then he exhaled. “But let me look into the cost of the properties you want, and I’ll write it all up and—”

Someone pounded on the door, rattling it in the frame.

“We’re closed,” Jonas shouted.

The next knock was twice as loud.

“Shove off,” Jonas barked. “We’re closed, I said.”

The knob twisted, and metal screeched. Startled, the cat bounded from the curtains into her owner’s arms. The door flew open. Two cloaked men shoved inside.

Jonas began, “Who the fuck are—”

The intruders drew revolvers and aimed them. Jonas and Dark dove behind the counter as bullets went flying. One lodged in the wood over their heads. Glass shattered. A screaming commotion echoed from the street outside. The boom of the next gunshot was earsplitting.

The cat dug its claws into its owner’s jacket, white hair standing on end.

“Shoot my things, if you must,” Jonas shouted, hunkered down beside the duke, “but if one blasted bullet hits my cat, I’m going to rip your fucking faces off!”

Another bullet pierced the wood. Dark grabbed for the door to the storage room and kicked it open. Jonas crawled inside with his pet.

As more shots rang out, Dark dragged his treasures in behind him. Jonas shut the door and threw the latch. The doorway was made of heavy wood, but a rain of bullets pelted a hole in the frame. The room was crowded with boxes and tables for sorting items.

“They’re bound to run out of ammo soon,” Jonas said, kicking a box of trinkets away from him.

“Are they trying to kill me, or are they trying to kill you?” Dark wondered aloud.

“Well, now I know why Leif wasn’t at work this morning,” Jonas said, prying a paw off his collar. “He must have tipped someone off about our meeting, and they’re here to rob us.”

“Who would Leif sell that information to?” Dark asked.

“The only person I know he’s taken bribes from in the past is Lord Glen Freest. Glen has lots of reasons to want me dead.” Jonas tried to set the cat down,

but she dug her claws in and refused to budge. The Bargainer winced.

"Same. What'd you do to the man?"

"I married the mate he wanted," he said with a sly grin.

"That'll do it," Dark said. "I can't stay here. I'm supposed to be at the ball."

"I'm sure Miss Easton will understand," Jonas said. The next bullet cut through the door, much too close to his head.

Dark reached up and over Jonas. He turned the knob twice, then thrice. Purple lit the threshold.

"What in the hottest Hell is that?" Lavendar light glowed in the Bargainer's dark eyes.

The duke pushed his treasures inside the safety of his sacred space, ignoring the question. "I'll send help for you."

"Oh no. No, no, no, you damn well won't leave me here!" Head down, Jonas pressed in closer as more bullets peppered the doorframe. "Take us with you!"

"I don't let people inside my hoard," Dark grouched, "and I doubt that cat is going to let go of you, so sit tight. I'll send—"

Cradling the cat like it was an infant, Jonas shook his head. "Whatever dragon thing is happening right now, you'd better suck it up, man! I have a wife and daughter who I promised I'd always be there for!" His gaze narrowed to slits. "If I catch a lead bullet in my head, I'll be a liar. Don't make me a liar, you great brute. Take me with you."

The sound of gunshots continued to echo about the pawnshop. Dark heaved a pained breath. "Fine, but touch anything in my hoard, and I mean *anything*, and I'll bite your hands clean off. Understand?"

"I'm not going to touch anything, for gods sakes!"

"Get in there, then!" Dark shoved him headlong inside. He followed the Bargainer, slamming the door shut.

Jonas rolled into the meadow, and his cat yowled and hissed in his arm. He rose to his feet, dusting down his woolen trousers with his free hand. "What are you doing now?"

Dark stood before the door, took hold of the handle once more, and twisted it. "Going to the winter ball. I'm late. If you want to see to your shop, you'll need to see to it from there."

When Jonas didn't answer, Dark looked behind him.

The Bargainer was covered in fairies. Jonas chortled at them. The cat clung to his jacket, rightfully wary of the girls as they zipped around. They climbed on the Bargainer's horns, swinging from them.

"I'm not touching anything," Jonas insisted, spreading his arms wide. "Stop looking at me like you're going to bite my hands off. They're touching *me*."

"Bebebebebe," Bebe buzzed, sailing toward the cat.

"Don't eat the feline," Dark shot over his shoulder. He turned the knob once more, closing his eyes so he could better picture the closet near the small library at the House of Night. He visualized marble floors, the dull gas lamps made for Lunar eyes, bookshelves and artwork that melded new and ancient.

He opened the door into a dark corridor. Twinkling blue and purple mage lights lit a path up ahead into the main hall. The cloying scent of incense burned in his nose. Jonas said a brisk goodbye to the girls and followed Dark out, settling his cat into the crook of his arm. They walked together down the corridor, funneling into the hall toward the ballroom.

The sound of angry bees cut through the string music. Dark looked up and spotted Ruby jetting from chandelier to chandelier in a panic, glancing this way and that, her tiny head on a swivel.

"Ruby," Dark shouted, waving the fairy child over.

"Rower!" Ruby shouted, jetting in closer, her bat-like wings buzzing behind her. "Rower, Rower, Rower!"

"Where is she?" Dark scanned the ballroom for her familiar white hair.

Ruby flew into his chest so hard she knocked him back a step. She grabbed the lapels of his formal jacket and jerked on them. "ROWER!"

Something was very wrong. Icy cold crept through Dark's veins.

"I'll handle the gunmen. You've got other problems," Jonas said, turning on his heels and departing at a gallop.

"Can you sense her? Take me to her, Ruby!" Dark commanded.

Jabbering and chittering, Ruby pulled on his jacket, leading him out of the ballroom, down a servant's corridor that dumped into the kitchen. Under the gas lamps and the glow from the stoves, Ruby's cheeks were puffy, and her eyes were tear-streaked.

Being shot at earlier was surely no coincidence. Those ruffians had been sent to kill him.

“Did you see a man with blue hair and pale white skin?” Dark demanded.

“Essss!” she hissed.

“Does he have her?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Esssssssss! Rower bibka!”

Dark shoved past staff, sprinting through the kitchen and out the scullery’s back door. Smoke poured from his nostrils. Ruby flew out ahead of him. He ran after her, toward the trees, thinking of the future he could expect if he wasn’t fast enough, wasn’t strong enough to save Tomorrow.

He’d be trapped as a mountain, looking up at her longingly while she walked amongst the stars.

And with that picture boiling in his mind, he erupted into his dragon form, flattening parts of the forest under heavy scaled plates.

Chapter 15



Tomorrow

When Tomorrow's eyes opened, the sack that reeked of root vegetables and dirt was still pressed over her face. She struggled through a moment of dizziness that made her uncertain what was up and where was down, but then one of her slippered feet came in contact with hard floor. She righted herself in a lumpy chair. The fabric felt worn and stank of mildew.

Scrambling, Tomorrow pulled the canvas off her face and blinked in the darkness. Most of the furniture in the room was covered in white oilcloth. A single fat candle burned on a desk beside a rusty letter opener and a dried-up ink well.

Movement in her peripheral stole her breath.

"You're awake," Glen said. He was seated somewhere off to the side in a chair draped in more sheeting.

It took her Seelie eyes longer to adjust, but she could make out his form in the shadows, his long legs crossed in front of him.

"Why am I still alive?" Tomorrow wondered aloud. Her mind was spinning, but her question seemed most pressing. She assumed he planned to kill her in some clever way that would look like an accident, but after peering briefly out the side window, it seemed he'd brought her to some old country estate in desperate need of attention. They were on the second floor. The grounds were overgrown. Rolling hills disappeared into wild woodlands.

Was this his sad excuse for a house? Was this what he meant about being a second son?

She could see stars in a clear night sky but no moon. She wasn't sure what time it was or how long she'd been asleep.

"You'll stay alive while you're still useful," Glen said. Smoke rose from a pipe in his hands. His knee bobbed.

From outside came the whinny of horses and the crunch of hooves on gravel. Shortly thereafter, footsteps climbed rickety stairs that squeaked and moaned under the weight of two people.

The door swung open, letting in more light from the hall gas lamp. Tomorrow glared at the fae scoundrel with the blue skin.

"I've brought Magistrate Balder here for you, Lord Freest," the fae said, then he stepped aside.

Tomorrow recognized the name. This was the same magistrate who was supposed to be creating her engagement agreement.

Balder pulled a bowler hat from his head, a short Lunar fae broad through the chest with the tail of a lemur. He wore a thick, midnight-black tunic and a bright blue cravat with a silver crescent pin at its center, like he'd come to the estate straight from the House of Judges.

"Lord Freest," the magistrate greeted.

"You've brought the document I require?" Glen rose smoothly from his chair and sat his lit pipe on a crooked end table.

The magistrate produced an envelope. He opened it and pulled out a stamped and sealed bit of fancy parchment. "And it's ready for your signatures."

"What are you up to . . . ?" Tomorrow's keen eyes picked up one of the words. *Marriage*, the certificate read at the top. "You've got to be joking!"

Glen ignored her, reaching for the document.

Magistrate Balder pulled it out of his grasp. "Payment first."

"I'm not signing anything!" Tomorrow's hands made fierce fists at her sides.

Balder blinked owl-like eyes at her as though he'd only just realized she was there. "She has to sign, or the agreement is useless."

"She'll sign," Glen said stiffly. He pulled his purse from his pocket, counting out several gold crescents.

"I'll sign nothing," Tomorrow spat. "I'd rather be married to a literal rat. And we're related, you ratbag!" The very idea made her nauseous.

Glen rolled his indigo eyes. "Don't be fussy. We're related by marriage. Cousins wed all the time."

“Not in the north.” Tomorrow placed a hand over her belly where a cramp was building.

Balder fidgeted uneasily. “Even if she does sign, what’s to stop her from protesting this arrangement the second we’re through? I can’t have her calling attention to this document you insist on having me witness or poking holes publicly in the scheme you’ve cooked up.”

“I’m sure he plans to kill me,” Tomorrow barked. “Are you all right with that?”

“She’s being dramatic, Balder. I warned you she might be. But don’t you worry. She’ll never leave this estate. I’ll be her husband, and I’ll keep her here where she belongs. You don’t want the duchy in the hands of a Seelie outsider, do you? When I’m a proper Lunar duke, I’ll see you handsomely rewarded for your loyalty to me.”

Whatever uneasiness the magistrate felt, his expression smoothed at that. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Right,” Glen said, turning on Tomorrow. “Where were we?”

He struck her with the back of his hand so hard she fell against the desk. She caught herself before she could smack her head. White sparks popped before her eyes. Seething, she held her weight there, breathing through her teeth, feeling like her next exhale might catch fire. She’d never wanted so badly to hurt another person before.

“That,” Glen said, straightening his cravat, “was so you’d know I won’t hesitate to hurt you if you don’t do exactly as you’re told.”

When she stopped seeing red, the rusty letter opener was there, inches from her fingers. His threat hung in her mind like a dark cloud. He’d tried to murder her so many times now. She’d spent the last year of her life terrified of death, frightened of him. Jumping at shadows, scared to walk the stars alone.

But Dark had made the stars so lovely, and she was no longer afraid of death. She’d found her courage again.

Glen prowled in closer. “Now, be a good little duchess and sign your—”

Thinking of her mate, Tomorrow grabbed the rusty letter opener and drove the bladed end into Glen’s thigh. He screamed at the ceiling. She ripped the blade out, and blood gushed from the wound.

Tomorrow swung to stab him again, but the horned fae scoundrel was on her, grabbing her arm, twisting back her wrist, prying the blood-soaked letter opener from her. She tried to kick him and caught only the edge of his trousers. He wrapped her up from behind and overpowered her, shoving her face against moldy wallpaper. Hall gaslights cast a reflection in the window, allowing her to see the room behind her.

“Fuck, fuck!” Glen stammered. He hobbled over to the magistrate and ripped the papers out of his hands. “I’ll pay you double if you’ll take a forgery!”

“Deal,” Balder said, and he put his back to him, allowing Glen to scribble their names against his jacket.

“There!” Glen said, limping forward. “Take the damned thing!”

Tomorrow squirmed, but the scoundrel’s hold only tightened.

Beyond the window, the war cry of a dragon boomed like thunder across the sky, so loud and so powerful it rattled the floorboards under her feet. Silence consumed the room. No one moved.

Face pressed to the wall so hard her cheek hurt, Tomorrow chuckled darkly.

* * *

Dark

Dark’s wings beat at the air. Ruby had got him most of the way, but he felt Tomorrow now, the pulse of their one-sided bond pulling him toward his mate. Ruby held on to his neck as a burst of speed sent him hurtling toward the lone country estate. He landed hard amongst the rolling, snow-covered hills. Horses whinnied uneasily from in front of the carriage in the drive. Dark breathed black smoke into the air. He opened his mouth and roared at the face of the building, their only warning.

“Give. Her. Back,” he demanded.

When nothing but silence answered him, he smashed an outbuilding flat. Then the stone carriage house went next, destroyed under his claws.

“Give me Tomorrow!” he thundered.

“Atta Rower!” Ruby squealed.

There was movement then. Dark pressed his face closer to the window. He spotted Glen in a second-story room, shouting at two other fae, and a growl rumbled deep in his chest. His fire rose up in his throat, ready for him.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs inside. He lowered his head, showing his massive teeth in a threatening leer as two fae ambled out of the house.

The first was dressed like he'd come from the House of Judges, in midnight black. "Your Grace. I am Magistrate Balder," the fae called. He held a paper in his hands, the font too small to read clearly at that distance. "I've just witnessed the marriage of Miss Tomorrow Easton to Lord Glen Freest."

"I signed nothing!" Tomorrow's voice carried from the second-story window.

Dark roared at the sky, their plot clear to him now. Glen couldn't take her inheritance by murdering her. She'd thwarted his every attempt, so he'd forced a marriage on her and would use the certificate to steal the duchy.

"Give me Tomorrow!" Dark bellowed, his breath knocking the bowler hat from the magistrate's balding head.

"She's with her husband inside. This is all quite legal and binding, I assure you," the magistrate said smugly. Rolling the stamped agreement between his hands, he bent low and scooped up his fallen hat, plopping it back on his head. "You're standing on Lunar lands. Here, Lunar laws reign supreme. Perhaps you should go back where you belong if you don't like it."

The magistrate climbed inside the carriage, and a horned Lunar fae with blue skin mounted the driver's seat, gathering the reins. Dark recognized the scoundrel.

"We are married now!" Glen shouted through the closed window. "It's been signed and witnessed by a magistrate. See the certificate for yourself! There's nothing for you to do here! The deed is finished. Go back to your mountains, you filthy lizard!"

Dark's fire burned in his throat. He used his claw to cut open his arm, accessing his magic. The duke lowered his head, dropped his jaw, and blew a black ball of fire out of his maw. The ball of flames ate up the magistrate, the carriage, and the driver before they even had the chance to shout. Nothing but smoldering ash remained.

The horses sped off, the ends of their detached harnesses still smoking.

Dark's big head swung around to face the window. "What certificate?" he said.

But Glen was gone. Dark pressed his eye to the glass and could see nothing inside. He wanted to rip the roof off and retrieve his love, but he could cause something to fall. He could hurt her by accident if he compromised the old building.

Out of options, he rounded to the front door. His claws were too big to turn the knob, but his long tail tapered at the end. It was supple and more efficient as a tool. He used it to turn the knob twice, then thrice. The door opened to his hoard.

"Girls!" he shouted.

It only took a moment for dozens of fairies to glide outside into the winter night.

"Forta Rower!" Ruby chattered at them, flying down to join the group.

"Get Tomorrow," Dark told them.

And he didn't have to say it twice. The girls flew up to the window, led by Ruby. Claws bared, they tore through wood and smashed glass. They were inside in seconds, swarming one room and then the next, in search of her.

Dark followed them from window to window, watching.

He found Glen holding Tomorrow by her hair, an arm around her throat in the master bedroom. When the fairies poured inside, he shoved Tomorrow at them and ran.

The girls grabbed her up, lifting her together as one unit, floating her out of the house and into the safety of Dark's claws. The moment she was in his arms, a vice released from around his heart.

Ruby tore after Glen, hunting him in the halls.

"Wait, Ruby!" Tomorrow twisted, trying to reach for her familiar. "She's all alone!"

Dark held her gently against his chest, where his body was warmest, to fend off winter's chill. "Ruby likes to bite," he reminded her.

"No, no, no!" Glen shouted.

His screams were abruptly silenced.

Ruby flew out to them, her cream dress streaked in red. She smiled brightly, needle-sharp teeth pink with blood.

"You did good, Ruby," Tomorrow said, hugging her tight, smearing her own gown in crimson.

Dark couldn't always make sense of the girl's chatter, but he was quite certain she'd responded with, "Of course I did."

Tomorrow leaned against his scaled chest and sighed. "I stabbed Glen in the thigh with a rusty letter opener for you."

"So fierce," he purred.

* * *

Dark

A day later, the duke sat at a wax-wood table in the hoard of his sister, Queen Sora. A decanter of clear liquor and three egg-shaped glasses rested between them.

Masha, the familiar, drank from one of the glasses with a forked tongue.

"You did *what* to a Lunar magistrate?" Sora exclaimed, leaning forward in her chair. Up until that part of the story, she'd been quiet and contemplative, nodding her head with understanding as he recounted the events of the day before. Now she was cross.

"He was a corrupt man," Dark said. "He took a bribe and signed my mate's name by force to—"

"A corrupt man you first attempted to bribe yourself," Sora scolded.

Dark shrugged his broad shoulders. "We were in a hurry, and no one needs to know that part now."

"The wicked cousin is no matter. He was hurting your mate. No one will bat an eye at that, but the magistrate posed no real threat to you or her. His false contract could have been dealt with, but you burned the man to ash," she shouted, shaking a fist at him, "and now you want me to smooth things over for you with Rain. She's the Bloody Queen of Night, for the divines' sakes. They don't call her that just because it's catchy."

Dark rubbed at the back of his neck. "She scares me a little."

"She scares me *a lot*," Sora snapped.

That was saying something. His sister wasn't the type to be intimidated by anyone.

"Will you help me?" he pleaded.

Her stormy glare softened. "This mate of yours had better be worth it."

"She brings me peace," Dark said. The peace he'd sought and finally found in her, only after he'd stopped trying to redeem himself. "She's worth it."

A growl rolled out of Sora, and the hut grumbled with her. The fire spat in the hearth, and the floorboards groaned. "Yes, I'll help. Not like I have any choice. How would it look if I let my brother get himself ripped apart and nailed to a door somewhere? Or worse."

Dark's throat bobbed. "Worse? Gods—don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"You really don't." Sora poured herself another glass of the clear liquor. It had no smell and tasted of tart fruits. She drank it down in one swift gulp. "I'd better get on with it, then, before she discovers the news herself and has time to stew on it. You definitely don't want that little fire-breather to stew."

"Before you go," Dark said, and the corner of his mouth curved upward. "I thought you might like to meet someone."

Sora's golden brows lifted. She resettled in her chair. "You brought your mate with you?"

"She's in the corridor waiting, just in case you were too angry for a visit."

Sora hummed in her throat, then she waved at the doorway. "Well, what are you waiting for? I'd like to meet the woman whose love made you ignite a magistrate like he was a birthday bonfire. Bring her in."

Dark left the table and jogged to the side door. He pulled it open, and Tomorrow clamored through the threshold, pink-cheeked. Her smirk was as bright as sunlight. Ruby sat on her shoulder, painted talons dangling in front of her.

Sora rose to her feet to greet them. As his mate drew near, the Unseelie queen extended her hand, but Tomorrow ignored the gesture, throwing her arms around Sora's middle and hugging the dragon tight instead. Ruby joined in on the affection, nestling between them.

"Oh?" Sora exclaimed.

"It's such an honor to meet you, Your Majesty," Tomorrow muttered.

“Another hugger,” Sora said, arms stiff at her sides. She frowned at Dark over the top of Tomorrow’s snowy head.

Dark sniggered. Tomorrow released her to explore the hoard with eager excitement. Ruby chittered with the same high energy as her mistress. At first, Dark was tempted to warn her off, but despite his sister’s grumping, the hoard hummed with contentment even as this new intruder ran her fingers over every corner and nook.

“This place is extraordinary,” Tomorrow said, gazing about with ever-expanding copper eyes. The hut sighed as though it were pleased by the compliment. She tapped her foot, and the floorboards squeaked. “That’s where I’d hide my treasures for sure.”

“Shine shinies,” Ruby chirped.

Sora chuckled. “What else do you see?”

“Oh.” Tomorrow hummed, glancing around. “Never-ending possibilities! Gemstones in the bricks. Priceless art in the chair cushions. Gold in the chimney. It’s cozy and homey and marvelously deceptive.”

She babbled on for a time, asking questions, then interrupting the answer to eagerly ask about something else, darting from one side of the room to the other like a bouncing ball of star fire.

Sora took her in with a watchful expression, arms crossed over her velvet dress. The hut continued to hum in a satisfied way.

Eventually, the queen explained her need to attend to urgent matters on her brother’s behalf and rose to leave. Dark let his mate and Ruby out into the corridor but hung back before joining them.

“Now you’ve met her.” Dark grinned at his sister who appeared as amused as she was befuddled.

A befuddled dragon.

“I could do without the hugging,” Sora said.

“You like her,” Dark accused. “Ferocious things always like Tomorrow.”

Sora’s lips quirked. “You’ve chosen well for yourself. Now get out of here. I’ll go and speak with the Queen of Night before she lops your head off. Or worse.”

Dark shuddered. “I wish you’d stop saying ‘or worse’.”

* * *

Dark

Three days later, Dark left his hoard to collect supper for himself and his mate. He sat in the dining room of the Gilded Boot, waiting for their meal. From his seat, he could see through the foyer to the parlor. The snow had fallen heavily that day, and the crowd was smaller than usual. The house was short on staff because of a winter storm. Their food was taking much longer than usual to be prepared.

The doors burst open. A sharp wind whistled through the foyer, snow blasting over the threshold to coat the entrance in glistening slush. A black cat bounded inside, and the scent of Hell followed him. The demon familiar took in the house with large yellow eyes. They found Dark stunned speechless in his seat, and they narrowed on him.

The parlor fell silent as all heads turned toward the foyer.

The Bloody Queen of Night joined her familiar, carrying a pine box so large it made her appear even more Seelie small than usual. Chairs scraped against the floor as patrons stood suddenly from their seats. Footmen wrestled with the door to close it against the winter storm. Once they had it bolted, they shuffled off to hide in the kitchen.

Rain's face was shadowed by the hood of a heavy brown cloak, only white hair and a narrow chin peeking out. The box in her arms was stained with moisture at the bottom. She set it down beside her tall boots.

Red dripped from the corner of the box.

Courtesans sprinted for the stairs. Patrons scattered. One pushed open a window and crawled his way out, braving the storm. Others ran for the side door. The hair on the back of Dark's neck stood on end, but he kept himself seated while the Bloody Queen of Night removed thick gloves from her hands one finger at a time, unmoved by the chaos her presence triggered.

Dark couldn't stop himself from imagining how many pieces he'd have to be cut into to fit in such a box. His stomach clenched.

When the parlor was empty save for Margot and Susan, the queen lowered her hood. There was fire in her amber eyes. Pulling back her cloak, she removed her elven dagger from its sheath, a long piece shot through with gold and green that glinted in the gaslights. Dark worked his throat.

Rain charged forward.

“My queen—”

She kicked his chair over, silencing him. He landed on his back with a thud that jarred his spine. Gathering himself, he kept still. When he tried to speak again, she silenced him with a boot on his throat.

“You are a *guest* of my court, Darko Yaga,” Rain hissed, her lilting accent full of melodious venom. “When there are problems in the Lunar Province, there are constables and magistrates. And when there is trouble still, there is *me*. You brought me a problem, and I was fixing it. Or did you not see the bloody evidence of my hard work hanging from the door of this great house?”

“I saw it,” Dark choked. Melting snow dripped from her sole to dampen his neck. “And I am grateful to you, Your Majesty.”

“You thank me by burning a Lunar magistrate to ash with your lizard breath. You thank me by taking matters into your own hands when you have no right. When others learn of it, they will say that my king does not have control over his court.”

“No, Rain—”

“You do not get to call me that any longer,” she snapped, pressing more weight against his throat.

He resisted the urge to fight back. That would only make matters worse for himself. “I reacted as a bonding mate. I was impulsive and scared of losing my love. And you’re right. I should have come to you about the magistrate.”

The weight against his neck lessened.

“When others learn of what you’ve done, they will take matters into their own hands as you have. There will be chaos, and the most vulnerable will suffer first and foremost. I should make an example of you to prevent it.” Despite her words, she pulled back her boot.

Dark remained on the floor, uncertain if he should move. She motioned for him to rise. As soon as he stood, Rain kicked his feet out from under him. He landed hard enough to rattle the paintings that hung on the walls. In the hall, the

demon cat meowed in a way that sounded suspiciously like laughter. Dropping to her knee, Rain grabbed Dark by the throat and turned him as though he were light as a sack of potatoes. She spun him on the hardwood to face the bleeding box.

“I fed what was left of the wicked one, Glen Freest, to my husband’s wolves.” Her hand was a vice around his neck. “When they were through, I shoved the remains of him inside that box. There is a letter tacked to the underside of the lid written in my hand for the Freest clan. A warning that, should they continue down this path, their remains will join Glen’s in the box. It is signed and sealed by the House of Night.”

Dark gasped for a breath, and her grip loosened. “Thank you, my queen,” he choked.

“I’m not yet finished with you.” She released his neck and caught him around his chin instead, forcing his eyes to hers. “You will deliver this box to the Freest family yourself. They will believe that you acted on my orders against the wicked rat and the corrupt magistrate. Then no one will say my king does not have control of his court.” She released him.

Rubbing at his sore neck, Dark smiled up at her. “You are most wise, my queen.”

Her lips remained pursed, but the corners of her hell-fire eyes crinkled. “You will call me Rain now, and I have another letter for you.”

“Rain,” he repeated obediently.

She sheathed her dagger and extended her hand. Her fingers were small and rough inside his. Scars and calluses rubbed against his own hard flesh. She helped him back onto his feet and removed a letter from her cloak.

He took the envelope, opening it with an elongating clawed finger. Inside he found an engagement agreement between himself and Tomorrow, signed, stamped, and sealed by the King of Night.

Towering over the queen, Dark grinned from ear to ear. “I am grateful for you, Rain, and for our king. I vow never to act on my own again in such a fashion.”

The demon cat came and sat on the end of Rain’s boot. His bushy tail curled around her ankle.

“We’re still not finished,” she told him. “You’ve created an opening in the House of Judges—however necessary you felt that was, you must now make it right. Your mother was Lunar. You are an educated lord and no stranger to the laws of the Faelands. Queen Sora assures me that, despite your recent conduct, you are a fair man. You will fill the opening you created until a replacement is secured.”

As long as his punishment did not separate him from his mate, he was happy to comply. Thankfully, Tomorrow could always be one door away from him now.

Dark lowered his head in subjugation. “I will serve your court until you are satisfied, my queen—Rain.”

“Yes, you will,” she said, and her demon echoed the threat in her words with a yowl.

Rain turned, and the cat sprang ahead of her into the parlor. In one graceful leap, he alighted atop the bar, demanding attention from Susan by swiping at her with his paw. The madam gave him what he wanted, scratching behind his ears and under his chin.

Margot met the queen at the archway, throwing an affectionate arm over the smaller woman’s shoulder.

“I didn’t mean to scare away all your customers,” Rain said quietly.

“Bah,” Margot said dismissively. “It was a slow night anyway, love. But, uh, how would you feel about nailing the occasional drippy body part on the side door from now on instead of the front entrance . . . ?”

Epilogue



Tomorrow

A week later, Tomorrow returned from her lengthy outing to the Gilded Boot. A footman took her fine new frockcoat and gloves. She wore a bright blue day dress that had been tailored to fit her, and she carried a tulip-shaped reticule made of silk. It was perfect for carrying the sleeping fairy child, who'd found all the meetings that evening very, very dull. The bottom of the new handbag was apparently quite perfect for napping.

The silk vibrated with Ruby's low snores.

Tomorrow went in search of Susan and Margot. Dressed as she was, patrons took notice and parted for her. She found her friends conversing behind the bar in the parlor, debating what to stock. This time of night, the house was starting to grow busy. Clearing her voice softly, Tomorrow stole their attention.

"My, don't you look fancy, Your Grace." Margot beamed at her. "How's it going with the inheritance headache?"

"It hasn't been much of a headache at all," Tomorrow said. "The earl was very helpful. He sat with me and my father's solicitor this evening, and we finalized everything. Your friend, Jonas, is securing orchards for me up north. Dark was supposed to hear from him today. And that's that."

"As glad as I am to hear of your good fortune, does this mean you'll be moving on soon?" Susan asked. "It won't feel the same without the two of you about."

Margot sighed wistfully. "Won't feel the same at all."

"We're not going anywhere just yet. There's still details to be ironed out, and we're in no hurry." Tomorrow leaned across the bar. The rest of what she had to

say was for their ears only. "At the winter ball, how did your pursuit of the dandy lord go?"

Color shot into Susan's cheeks.

Margot cackled. "It went too well. She can't get rid of him now."

Susan elbowed her business partner. "Anthony's sweet and a bit inexperienced. Thinks he's in love, but he'll learn better soon enough. I'm only interested in lust and a good time."

"And deep pockets, don't forget," Margot tittered. "I doubt he'll learn that anytime soon, though. He's too smitten. What'd you do to him, anyway? He keeps turning up here like a lost puppy dog."

Susan ignored the question and reached across the counter to squeeze Tomorrow's arm affectionately. "Did you need something else, love?"

"Actually, no." Tomorrow's chest puffed out proudly. "For the first time in a very, very long while, I don't need anything at all. In fact, I get to *give* something, so please don't put up any fuss about it. I owe you both so much. I insist."

"Aw, you've got us all wrong," Margot said, swatting a hand at the air to shoo her words away. "We never make a fuss about gifts."

Susan agreed wholeheartedly. "Right you are. We love getting things."

Careful not to jostle Ruby's sleeping form, Tomorrow retrieved a leather purse stuffed with gold crescents and silver half-pieces from her reticule. There was more wealth in that small leather bag than she'd ever had in the three centuries she'd been alive, and now she could give it away without flinching because she was the Duchess of Easton at last.

She dropped the fat purse on the bar. It gave a satisfying thunk against the wood. "When you took me in, I thought I would need to turn tricks to earn my keep. That life isn't for me, but I planned to soldier through." Tomorrow swallowed down the lump of joy growing in her throat. "But instead of putting me to work, you told me you had a fund for women like me, women who were in trouble and had nowhere else to turn. You called it the Penny fund."

Susan and Margot shared a meaningful look. When they faced her again, their eyes shimmered more brightly in the gaslights. Margot blinked a moment before her gaze cleared. Susan's smile was solemn.

"I don't know who Penny is," Tomorrow said, "but I sure am grateful to her. I think it's wonderful what you're doing in her name, and I want you to have

everything in that purse for the next woman who needs you.”

Susan lifted the heavy bag, weighing it in her palm. Coins clinked together inside. “For the Penny fund,” she said in gentle agreement.

“And maybe some new shoes for the *Margot* fund.” Margot waggled her brows at her business partner. “What?” she said when Susan shot her a look. “Penny would like it if I got new shoes.”

“You have enough dratted shoes,” Susan scoffed. “You don’t even wear all of them.”

“Some of them aren’t for *wearing*,” Margot insisted with an impressive pout. “Some of them are just for making me happy. Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“You are happy, you silly tart. In fact, you could probably do with a little less happiness in your life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tomorrow listened to the pleasant sound of their playful bickering until her keen ears picked up a strange noise coming from outside. Something very large had landed hard enough to make the ground tremor gently. She craned her neck to peek through the nearest window.

“Right on time,” Susan said.

There on Main Street amongst the cobbles, Dark stood alone, illuminated by gas lamps, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his heavy coat. His horns and tail steamed in the cold. The corner of his lips twitched.

He crooked a finger at her.

That gesture would forever remind her of the first time they’d made love. Butterflies took flight in her belly. She left Ruby and her reticule in Susan and Margot’s capable care. With the help of a footman, she donned her coat but forgot her gloves in her excitement.

The street was deserted, which was quite unusual that time of night. Joining him on the pavers, she could now see why. A massive dragon perched carefully at the corner, one heavy claw balanced on the brownstone building nearby, wings tucked in tight. Her long tail disappeared down the road behind a brick edifice. She was plated in green, ocean-colored scales. Four bone-like horns sprouted from her crown. The great beast snorted at them, and soot shot out her nostrils.

“Is that your sister?”

Dark nodded. “Every time I try to dance with you, we get interrupted—but not this time. She’ll see to that.”

At the theater across the road, long windows opened one at a time. String music began to play—a dragon song. Their dragon song. Dark took her in his arms and led her into a dance. Her hand in his, winter’s chill vanished from her bare fingers. Above them, stars glistened alongside a quarter moon.

“How did things go with the queen and her fairy ward?” Tomorrow asked.

The corners of his dark eyes crinkled. “The fairy made her cocoon in an old boot surrounded by her favorite things. The girls filled the boot with the queen and king’s hair clippings and several donations of fur from a demon cat. The familiar looked more like a rat afterward, but he seemed relieved that she wanted to remain with them during the process instead of staying inside my sanctuary.”

“I’m happy for them.” It would break Tomorrow’s heart if Ruby wanted to leave after she’d matured. Though that was very unlikely given her willingness to sit through boring meetings just to be near her.

Tomorrow lacked the grace of an immortal, but she danced with confidence, following his lead from one turn into the next. The sky clouded over, and snow fell in fat, glistening flakes. But it wasn’t cold, not in his arms. The droplets landed and broke apart on the ground.

When the song finished, he pulled a ring from his pocket. The stone at its center was nearly as large as a coin and just as round. It rested in a gilded setting fit for a dragon. A fat, elegant gem the color of fire. A ring that belonged in a hoard.

“Tomorrow, will you—”

“Yes!” she squealed.

When she stopped bouncing, he wrapped her up and kissed her brow.

“Will you marry me?” he asked again, more hurriedly this time, like it didn’t count unless he shoved all of the words out first.

As she vigorously nodded her head, he slipped the bulky ring onto her finger. It fit loosely, but she jerked her hand out of his, clutching it over her heart, unwilling to let him fuss with the sizing. It was hers forever now.

“Yes, yes, yes, *yes*.” Her hand bobbed. “My gods, it’s stunning and so *heavy*.”

He guffawed at her, sending a puff of mist into the air.

“I mean it!” she insisted, wiggling her fingers around the stone. She made a fist and flexed. “My left arm is going to get so much stronger than my right . . .”

A new song had started, a sweet and haunting tune. Chortling, Dark led her into a slower dragon turn.

“I’ll dance with you for as long as you like,” he vowed. “For the rest of our immortality if you wish it. You’re my most prized treasure. My star. Everything I have, Sunshine, is now yours.”

Her eyes went glassy. “It’s all so beautiful,” she breathed. Her nose reddened, and she sniffed. “I just . . . I want to ramble on and on and on about how much I love you. I want to say the tenderest, most wonderful things, but for once, I think I might be speechless.”

“Mate of my heart, it’s not speechless if you’re still talking,” he teased.

Her grin inspired his.

Her feet were inclined to tangle, and the cobblestones were slick with ice. Her heel slid. His tail caught her, bracing her back.

“So useful, that tail.” She beamed at him.

“I’ve got you.” Under the gaslights, Dark gripped her waist and lifted her with ease into the next spin. “I’ve always got you.”

The End

* * *

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